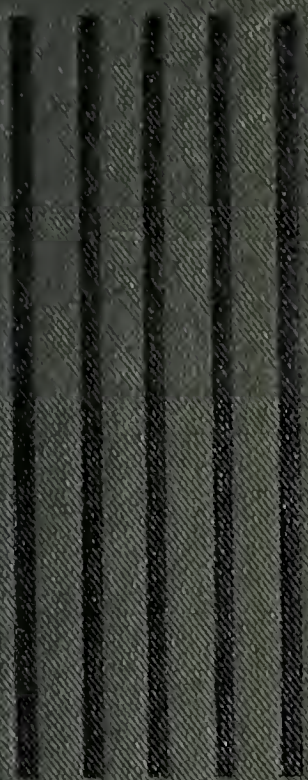


MICHAEL'S WIFE



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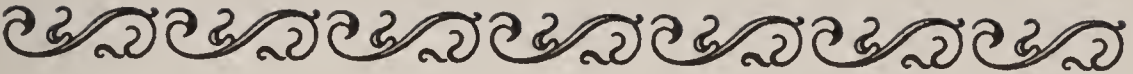
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MICHAEL'S WIFE

BY ALICE DEFORD

SINGING RIVER
MICHAEL'S WIFE



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BY

ALICE DEFORD



Boston

LOTHROP, LEE AND SHEPARD COMPANY

1934



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MICHAEL'S WIFE

Chapter One

I

SNOW was falling. Gently, almost wistfully. It whispered in the dry leaves of the oak trees, and drifted down to lie as lightly as the breast feathers of a swan upon the branches of the hemlocks beyond the river. It traced carefully the twisting field paths to the farms, and blanketed the big haycocks. It covered the long slopes of the roofs on the little houses of the old town, and caught on the weathercock of the white church beside the green. Silently, stilly, it fell, muffling the creak of farm wagons and the horns of cars, hushing the voices of children as they laughed and jostled and rolled each other on their way home from school.

The clock on the church was striking the hour: four deliberate strokes. The church door opened and two people came out. A man and a woman. A big man with his hat in his hand, regardless of the snowflakes that lighted on his brindled head and weather-beaten face; and

a woman in black, a gleam of burnished hair showing beneath her small black hat, steady eyes looking straight ahead.

On the top step the man turned with a sudden smile, brilliant, engaging: "Well, Julie,—we've done it," he said. Then, looking down more soberly into the face lifted to his, "My dear, I'll try to make you happy."

"Yes, Michael, I know you will," came the quiet words. A smile touched her thin face with swift, breath-taking beauty: "You're catching a good bit of snow on your hair, Mike," she said.

He laughed: "I like the snow on my hair," he told her.

Upon that he thrust an arm through hers in a brotherly fashion, and together they went on down the steps to the car that waited. Slowly they started along the elm-bordered street that led into the town. In silence they skirted one side of the square, and turning into the road that crossed the end, passed an old red house that had once been a tavern, and made for the open country.

For the first time, then, Michael Cochrane sent a look at the girl sitting so still beside him. His eyes caught the warm glint of her hair beneath the brim of her hat; took in swiftly the line of her cheek and pointed chin against the fur of her collar, the dark sweep of her lashes, the little, withdrawn, half-secret smile. She was looking straight before her, as though not conscious of him. "I wonder—" he thought quickly, and then must turn to the business of getting the car past a string of three blue log-sledges pulled by plodding horses along the very middle of the road.

The girl had felt that brief look. She felt helplessly

each smallest look of the man beside her. —Julie Byrd until a few short minutes ago; for better, for worse, she was now Julie Cochrane.

With curious vividness she seemed to hear again Michael's words to her as they had stood, on that cheerless November afternoon, in the old firelit room of the house that had been her father's: "Why don't you marry me, Julie?" She felt again a flame run through her. He had spoken quietly then, his deep-set Cochrane eyes, half grave, a little whimsical, looking into hers: "We don't love each other, of course; but we've known each other and liked each other for years. —I like you enormously. I think we could make a go of it. —You love Windyhill. You could have all of it. —We don't need to live together," he had gone on with simple frankness. "There's loads of room in the old house." He had put a friendly hand upon her shoulder, "How about it, Julie?"

And she—why had she done it? How could she have? Just because she loved him, she should have said a kindly no, putting him gently off, sparing him the fulfillment of that generous gesture. For that was all it was.

He was now, in the eyes of the law, her husband; but, in the eyes of love—nothing! God help her to go through with it and not hurt things for big Michael Cochrane. . . . He was saying something now in his genial, offhand way. She pulled herself together and turned to face him.

A thrill of pleasure for the charm of her went through Michael. Foolish of him, but he really was glad that Julie was coming to Windyhill for good. He did like her tremendously. . . . "Wonder what old Toby will

say?" came the brief, amused thought, and was gone.

"Of course, Julie," he went on, "just now, while you are in mourning for your father, you naturally wouldn't have wanted to go on any kind of honeymoon. And besides," he gave her a sudden smile that was naïvely humorous, "you don't want that sort of thing with me, anyway."

"No, Michael," she answered. Then, as though that were quite settled, and satisfactorily, simply going on to something else: "Do you ever hear from Toby? Where is he now?"

Michael laughed: "Toby? Lordy, no! I never hear, and can only guess where he is by an occasional puff in some English paper on farming. Sheep are his hobby, you know. He's been skipping about proving a theory of his, on ranches in Australia. That's what gets in the papers. Some of the proofs. —Young divil! He's the greatest living rover. Been at it five years now. The farm's always here, if he should want to come home to roost. But I'm afraid he won't."

Julie thought of the wild, hot-headed boy she had known, who had insisted stormily, unreasoningly, that she should marry him—five years ago. She had never heard one word from him since that day. . . . And even then she had loved his brother. Michael had never known—or had he?—of Toby's mad wooing. But that was all over and done with. Long ago, Toby would have forgotten it—and her. . . .

A curve of the river was before them, flowing darkly between the snowy rushes at the edge. They crossed the bridge, and soon the road began to climb. Farms lay on either side: rolling fields, a huddle of barns and hayricks

at the end of a rutted lane; woodsmoke rising from a squat chimney into the falling snow, sending forth its troubling choky fragrance to drift on the still air. A cock pheasant rocketed up from a clump of juniper in the lee of a stonewall at the side of the narrowing road. Julie heard the raucous protesting squawk trail out behind them.

"It's heavenly country, isn't it, Michael?" she said at last.

"I love it. I love it all, Julie," came the simple answer.

For a moment again, as the car climbed the hill, there fell a silence. Out of it Michael spoke:

"I haven't told a soul but sister Naomi what we're up to to-day." He chuckled, looking straight ahead, "And, of course, old Sam and Hannah. They're in a darling old fuss-budget twitter, at the thought that they're goin' to have a missis. Rather, that I am. Hannah's been at me for years—romantic old dear—to do something about my single state of *unblessedness*." He laughed softly, at some recollection, and then went on: "All Naomi's boys will be in a whirl of excitement, getting you for their aunt." Then turning spontaneously to his new-made wife: "Do you know, Julie, it really will be terribly nice to have you living at Windyhill. It needs you. It needs you badly."

"I wonder—" was the surprising answer.

"You needn't," Michael assured ingenuously. But he remembered suddenly what Naomi had said, when he had told her of his plans, and had asked her, without a thought, what room Julie had better have. She had looked at him for a moment, considering him with a sort

of quizzical amusement tucked away in her eyes, and then had said in her frank way (he couldn't imagine why the words had stuck so in his mind): "Mike, Mike—you're incorrigible! You innocent, altruistic lamb! You were born hundreds of years too late. —You were always '*sans peur*', I'll grant you; but—'*sans reproche*', too?"

He had told her that she was a beautiful old goose. Laughing, she had shaken her head, denying all three charges; but she had gone to work, cheerfully acquiescing in his demands. Julie was to have Naomi's old room looking down over the shoulder of the hill to the river.

"Naomi will be there to give us a welcome, Julie," he said happily.

They had come to the highest point of the road. Just beyond, a gate stood open into a lane that curved down across a snowy sweep of hillside, past three great pine trees, to an old square house of brick.

"Let's stop, a minute, Mike," said Julie. "I want to see Windyhill all together first."

Michael pulled up at the gate and shut off the engine. Julie heard him heave a sigh of pleasure: "Isn't it deliciously quiet?" he almost whispered. And then: "Let's smoke!" He drew out a leather case and offered her a cigarette. He lighted it for her, then got one going himself. The thinning snow rustled faintly in the dry leaves of an oak tree beside the road. A few flakes drifted idly in on to their knees. From below, a dog barked. A blue farm wagon loaded with smoking dressing passed them, to the accompanying homely reek of manure. The ruddy-faced boy who drove the big chestnut farm horse grinned a salute, which Michael answered, and with

muffled creaking the cart went on down the way they had come. Then all was still.

It was a splendid sweep of country that lay before them. With a curious feeling battling within her, stirring her heart and tightening her throat, Julie's eyes followed the snow-blunted curve of ruts bitten into the hillside, past the darkness of the pine trees sharp-cut against a white world, to the old brick house that was Windyhill,—that was Cochrane. Then, as though to match the flight of her mind in its sudden wild leap for an old freedom, her eyes caught with an odd flash of gratitude the far loop of river where it swept about the foot of a darkling wooded hill.

"I like that loop of river, Michael," she said, her voice hushed into control, and then, remembering a nearer duty, she brought her eyes back to rest on Michael's face. "You love it very much, don't you?" she said gravely,—*"Windyhill. Your life here. . . . Don't let me ever get in the way of it all—and you. Remember, Michael, that I have asked that of you."*

"You dear, foolish woman. How could you?" he answered. "And don't forget there are two sides to that. Give me your hand," he said.

He took the hand she gave him into a strong grasp. "A compact!" He smiled into her eyes. "Never to stand in each other's way. Remember, *you*, Julie, that means *me*, too."

"I'll remember, Mike," she said slowly, steadfast eyes meeting his, and gently she withdrew her hand. She looked past him to the other side of the road, where a group of farm buildings about a farmhouse, a huge red

barn and two silos, were so much a part of the slope that went on climbing to the pine-clad shoulder of the hill, that they might have sprung up there from seeds, long ago, and grown with the trees. The early dusk of January was beginning to fall. A lighted lantern in the barn hung against a stall, showing the quarters and long tail of a gray farm horse, and a three-cornered patch of hay just above. On a sudden, across the stillness of the yard sounded the clink of a milkpail, and men's cheerful voices. A collie came to the open door and stood for a moment, then turned slowly away and padded out of sight. Julie drew in a long breath, and coming back from her thoughts, turned and laid a hand lightly on Michael's knee. "It's a bargain, Michael," she said, quite unaware of the space of silence that had widened between them. Then, with a little shadowy smile, not looking at Michael: "My cigarette's finished. . . . Let's go on—down the hill."

"Yes—we'll go on down the hill, Julie." As Michael looked at her his eyes grew suddenly sober. "But there's something I'd like to say, first."

"I'm forty years old,—a good bit more than you; and I'm a confirmed countryman. This place, and my books,—the dogs and horses—are my life. Nothing else matters much, I'm afraid," he confessed. "I hope you'll be happy at Windyhill. And you won't forget, will you—that now—what's mine, is yours, also?" Without waiting for an answer, he started the big roadster and turned into the lane that dropped over the hill—going down.

Dusk was falling on the whiteness of the quiet earth. It had stopped snowing, and a strip of clear, pale yel-

low showed in the western sky, above the darkness of the trees across the river. For a moment Julie saw these things, and then as the lane swung past the pine trees the old house before them shut the sky away.

The air was filled with the tang of woodsmoke. Light shone out from a lower window. They were there.

Simultaneously, it seemed to Julie, the door flew open. Boys and dogs, all mixed up together, poured forth in a hilarious and joyous babel of shouts and barks. One of the company had opened the door of the car.

"Hello, Aunt Julie," said a boy's jolly voice.

"Hello—Pip," said Julie, laughing into a pair of mischievous eyes.

Somehow, a cocker puppy had slipped past them all and scabbled up into Julie's lap. A gleam of hope touched Michael Cochrane's wife. *This* way she could do it.

2

"I couldn't stop the young ruffians. Nothing would hold 'em. It's Saturday, you see." Naomi Sheridan stood smiling in the warm light of the doorway.

"How are you, dear Julie? I think the boys show you what a welcome you have at old Windyhill." She put her arm about the girl before her, in a happy embrace.

Julie had seen the old hall, a hundred times before. But now, in an overwhelming flash of desperation, the very warmth and human friendliness of it all made her feel an outsider. The fire that leaped up the wide chimney, the black and white setter curled up at one end

of the settle, the splendid cherry-colored geranium that stood in the deep-set window beyond the door,—joyous boys and barking dogs, her husband, and lovely laughing Naomi,—they all *belonged*: would she, ever?

But they gave her, mercifully, no chance to entertain, for long, any such troubling thoughts. Nine-year-old Martin, the youngest Sheridan, with his fair hair and long, gray Cochrane eyes, was at her elbow, looking up with his engaging smile: "There's the most splendid big tea," he told her, and a friendly paw was thrust into hers. "Micky said we'd have to call you *Aunt* Julie now." His eyes twinkled with fun. "We almost had a scrap about it. I said Julie was better by itself, just like always."

"Mike's all the handle *I* ever get, and my hair's as gray as a badger," broke in Michael. "Come on, Marty. Where's the big tea?" He looked down at Julie with half shy, half possessive concern in his fine eyes. "Wouldn't you like to nip up, first, to your room, for a spot of powder or such?"

Julie had never loved him more than at that moment. She smiled and shook her head.

"Take off your cute little hat, *Aunt* Julie," said Micky, who frolicked through life the middle brother of the five, "so we can see the fire shining on your nice red hair."

"Yes, do," urged Martin. "Pip said you looked just like a Madonna—however *they* look—the lovely way you part it in the middle"

Tom tweaked Martin's ear, and Micky burst out laughing. Someone trod on a dog's tail, drawing forth from the sufferer an outraged yelp.

Julie's coat and hat were off and borne proudly to a

place of safety by quiet Tim, who came next to Martin. Then Naomi had her arm through Julie's and they were all crowding cheerfully along the hall to the old library at the southern end of the house.

"There's probably a dog in every chair," warned Michael.

"And why not?" said Naomi placidly. "You never told 'em nay. —We're really all dreadful barbarians," she confided to Julie with a disarming smile.

"Like the Duchess's neighbors in 'Alice in Wonderland'," suggested Pip at Julie's elbow, "'We're all mad here.'" Of Naomi's five boys, Julie knew best, and loved most, sixteen-year-old Pip. She turned to him now with a quick smile of amusement.

"My God!" burst out Michael, at the door of the library, "I damn near forgot about Hannah and Sam.

"Hang on a minute. I promised 'em—welcome—you know," he made a vague gesture, and was gone.

"Well, let's get near the fire and tea, anyway," said Naomi serenely. "There's not room for the whole troop to foregather here on the threshold."

It was a fascinating room. To Julie, who loved old things, color and beauty, it had always been a delight. Gracious and livable with an indefinable charm that was a happy mixture of simplicity and sophistication. A room made by men and women who knew, and cared deeply for, old lovely things. Its beautifully proportioned windows looked over fair rolling country that was theirs . . . farmlands, wooded hills against the sky, a winding river. . . . A fire burned on the wide hearth. There were flowers (Michael loved flowers, and Naomi was a genius

with them), golden and tawny wallflowers in a copper jar, pale yellow freesia in a thin old flip glass. They filled the room with a cool fragrance that was apart from the delicious warmth of the burning pine logs.

Tea was indeed there. Martin had in no way exaggerated. Michael, too, had been right. At least three chairs were filled. Tails wagged, patiently expectant dog eyes were fastened upon the array before the fire. But no morsel had been touched. Barbarians they might be, but there was one law that was not lightly broken. Punishment was sure to follow, and swiftly, upon such a lapse.

"Oh—everyone, how heavenly it is,—this room," whispered Julie. "I never remember just how nice. It's a fresh surprise each time."

"Hist!" prompted Micky in a stage whisper from the doorway,—*"Rightabout face. Here comes It,—the 'Welcome.'*"

"Be still, Micky, you young idiot," chuckled his eldest brother, Tom.

There was a rustle of starched calico. In the waiting silence a board creaked.

"It's a proud day for us, so, Mr. Michael," said a cheery voice.

"For me, too, Hannah," came Michael's reassuring answer. Micky scudded out of the way and slid behind the door. A gurgle, ending in a suppressed squeak, came from Martin, and they were there: Michael, towering in the doorway behind a plump, rosy-cheeked woman with gold-rimmed spectacles, and a wiry little man with sandy hair, and of indeterminate years, bringing up the rear.

Julie had known them both since she could remember, these two old servants of the Cochrane family; but now a sudden wave of shyness swept her. Then the firelight caught and flickered on one of the lenses of Hannah's spectacles. It was absurdly as though she winked. Julie's face broke into its thrilling smile. She was shaking hands, and she was listening to the old woman's solemn words of greeting.

"I've know'd ye, Miss Julie, since ye were no bigger nor a rollin' puppy. I've know'd ye too when that bright flame of yer hair went flashin' as ye wheeled overright the hill on yer speckled pony. Praise be to God for this day, that ye should look favor on Mr. Michael, an' he left lonely as a gold eagle up on the high mountain!"

Tears burned behind Julie's eyes at the beauty and the pathos of the old Irishwoman's words. In a rush of gratitude she had leaned and kissed the soft wrinkled cheek. "Thank you, Hannah," she said simply, and turning held out her hand to Sam.

"Welcome to home, Mrs. Michael," he said.

"The tea looks splendid, Hannah," Naomi broke in cheerfully upon the solemnity of the moment.

"Will there be enough, so, for all the boys?" asked Hannah, coming down to earth as it were, with a breath of relief. "Boys is hungry things."

"There's mounds of it," assured Pip with an encouraging grin. "Don't let that worry you, Hannah, Hannah, Hannah."

The two old servants having departed, a happy hum of voices ensued. Casual and friendly. Naomi, blithely ignoring (for the simple reason that she never thought of it)

that this girl with the shapely flaming head was now Michael's wife, and therefore should be in the place she so many times had filled in the haphazard easy-going ways of the house, was pouring out the tea. She knew just how everyone liked it, and quickly and deftly proceeded with the business of letting them have it, keeping going, the while, an amusing scatter of conversation. Making, in some way known to her, sense and continuity hold sway over and above the apparent irrelevancy of different bits of news, or startling (to the uninitiated) snatches of information, flung at her from Michael or one of the boys. Unshaken by it all, she calmly tossed back telling sentences, even as she addressed her entrancing, half-amused attention to Julie.

From the bottom of her heart Julie blessed her. And then forgot even to do that.

"That's nonsense, Tom," (Naomi, to her eldest-born, just turned eighteen). "You simply expect the impossible."

"No, Mother, I don't."

"Good heavens! Give the man a chance. If in these mad times, like the Duchess's cook in the inimitable scene from 'Alice' that Pip's just quoted, the President flings a handful of pepper in the soup, it's just what it needs. Let the good man stir it hard—the soup. Supposing the world and his wife do sneeze a bit at each stir of the Big Spoon: let 'em! So far, no one has dared to stir the Soup Pot vigorously *enough*. That's been the *real* trouble." Here she gave a delicious chuckle and held up a hand: "That's all, friends. The Storm is over."

"Incorrigible woman!" said Michael, with a grin of

brotherly amusement. "You've damn well hit the nail on the head."

Michael and young Tom Sheridan were standing before the fire. What a fine big thing Michael was, thought Naomi in a surge of affection. Distinguished looking, too, and utterly unaware. He turned, just then, to look down at Julie. She was bending to caress the black cocker puppy in her lap. The firelight shone on her face. Pip had been fairly astute, thought his mother. Julie *was* rather like a Madonna— There was a certain asceticism about her face. The pure line of cheekbone and jaw, the shadowy smile about her lips. She was looking up now at Michael, and there was a quality, subtle and arresting, about that thin face, that stirred Naomi to quick wonder. Those long, gray-green eyes, with their dark lashes—not like any Madonna, they! Just Julie, withdrawn, aloof now, but potential fire. How would it all come out? flashed the question, unbidden, through Naomi's head.

In the corner of the room, Pip had begun to play the piano—a dreaming sort of thing. Micky was feeding bits of muffin to Michael's water spaniel, Fanny. Tim and little Martin had rolled up a corner of the rug behind the table, across the hearth from Naomi, and, sprawled out in the bare floor, were playing a horse-racing game. A faint protesting squeak came from the handle that wound in the horses on their strings. Lying back in the depths of her chair, Naomi gave herself up to tranquil speculations, letting things and time slide blissfully by, to the whisper and flicker of the fire. The world was a nice sort of place, even if the times were fast and furious, and for the moment things seemed on the

brink of ruin. She closed her eyes and listened to Pip, vaguely conscious, at the same time, that Michael was showing something to Julie that delighted her.

In the quiet of the house she heard the front door shut with a subdued thud. Sherry's come, she thought contentedly.

"Hello everybody,—anybody!" The words rang out, stirring the peaceful room to life, sudden, dynamic. Footsteps crossed the hall. A glad, incredulous "*Toby!*" sprang from Michael.

In the doorway, seeming to bring with him the feeling of wind and sun and wide places, stood a man with thick light hair and incredibly weather-tanned face. His eyes leaped into sudden mirth, at the sight before him.

"The prodigal son's returned," said a laughing voice. —"I smell the fatted calf a'roasting."

3

The Sheridans had departed an hour ago, to take their happy-go-lucky way down the snowy hillside to the house by the river, that, in a fashion known only to Naomi and the old house itself, tucked them all away under its rambling roof. Michael had gone with Julie up to her room, and shortly after, at an urgent call from his foreman, had left for the farm.

In the hall, the fire burned, whispering across the silence to the grandfather clock by the stairs, that ticked solemnly on, making, as is the way of life, more commotion in the mere telling of it, than did time, itself, in passing. Two

setters and the black cocker puppy slept in prone abandonment on the rug before the hearth. At the end of the settle Toby Cochrane sat nursing the head of a drowsy water spaniel upon his knees. His fair head rested against the high back, and the firelight flickered over his thin, brown face. His eyes, fastened upon a flame that licked up between two logs, brooded unseeing. For a long time nothing had happened to break the quiet or stir him from the thoughts that were his. It might have seemed that nothing ever would. Then a log fell apart; a dog lifted his head; light footsteps crossed the hall above. Toby came back from his dream, and turned his head against the back of the settle to watch the stairs that went up along the paneled wall, in the corner. Slowly, unaware, Julie was coming down, moving with lithesome grace, the soft black of her dress clinging to her slimness and trailing after her with a faint swishing sound. Her face, beneath her flame of hair, was more pale than usual. Toby slid out from under the weight of the sleeping spaniel (she went on sleeping, undismayed), and got to his feet.

"Greetings, Mrs. Cochrane!" he said, and there was a glint of raillery in his eyes.

"Hello, Toby," Julie answered with a smile, and came on down the stairs.

"Scram, dogs!" With the toe of a slippered foot Toby gently stirred up the sleeping setters. Then: "Come up and toast your shins," he invited. "Mike had to fly to the farm, on a hurry call. Cows *will* calve, if the roof is falling."

The girl's eyes twinkled, "And if it isn't?"

"Julie—you're beautifully the same," Toby said sud-

denly. Then he thrust out a hand to grasp hers: "I'm terribly sorry about your father," he said impulsively, "I didn't know, of course—before."

"Thank you, Toby," she answered simply, her beautiful, grave eyes for a quiet moment meeting his. "I know you are." Then gently withdrawing her hand, she turned away and stood looking down into the fire.

Something stirred in Toby. Something tremendous, and frightening, and old as time. . . . Oh, he thought he had forgotten it all—had got over it, absolutely. And now—that same disturbing fragrance swam about him, assailing his senses, moving his soul. So cool, so subtle, like wild white violets. . . . Her gray-green eyes . . . the way her dark lashes lay upon her cheeks . . . that beautiful smooth head. . . . It was all there,—every smallest, exquisite bit of it . . . even the things he had forgotten, until now.

As he stood there, his eyes upon her, the door behind him opened. He turned to see Sam.

"Mrs. Michael—?" The old man cleared his throat. "It's Mr. Michael, on the telephone. He has to stay a bit. And will ye and Mr. Toby have dinner, he says. He'll come direct back, so—whin it's over."

Julie had turned about: "All right, Sam. Thank you," she said gravely. Toby, watching Julie, waited till Sam had gone. Then: "Didn't I tell you?" he whispered, with a chuckle. "The roof is falling."

"You're a goose, Toby," said Julie; but she laughed softly as she said it.

Thus it was, for the simple and unavoidable farm reason that a cow's time had come, that, on her wedding night,

Julie took her first meal in her husband's house, without her husband, and with her husband's brother.

No one would ever know what thoughts and feelings whirled beneath Toby Cochrane's calm exterior during that meal. Nor what misgivings, or hopes, or despairs, found their way into the mind of the girl who looked quietly forth upon this strange bridal feast.

At the head of the old oval table, with the fire behind her, and a gray-eyed Cochrane of the past looking down from the wall upon her firelit head, sat Michael Cochrane's new-made wife. Upon her right, broad and spare in his decorous dinner jacket, sat Michael Cochrane's brother. At the foot of the table, beyond the silver candelabra, and a bowl of deep blue Staffordshire filled with grapes, the light of the candles shone mistily on Michael Cochrane's empty place.

They talked of simple things, the ranch in Australia, sheep and the ways of sheep; and Toby told of the joys of certain hardships, in a big, sun-swept country.

And when the meal was over, when no Michael came, gravely Toby took up his glass of amber sherry. Standing, he held it high, his eyes upon his brother's wife.

"To the bride!" he said. "Happy days!" He drank the wine, and, turning, tossed the empty glass on to the hearth, where it fell with a clink and tinkle, breaking into fragments that caught the firelight and twinkled back.

Julie bowed her head. Then taking up her own as yet untouched wine, she rose slowly to her feet. Lifting the glass, she looked down the table to Michael's empty place.

"To Michael!" she said, and to Toby, watching her, it seemed that her eyes burned with the clear brightness of a green flame. Then, even as she drank the wine, the front door opened and swiftly shut. Someone was running up the stairs, two at a time. Footsteps sounded overhead.

Michael, still faintly reminiscent of carbolic, but with a smile lining his lean face, his splendid eyes very happy, met them at the library door.

"Well—?" drawled Toby wickedly.

"A bull calf," answered Michael, and laughed. He slid his arm through Julie's and swept her across to a deep chair before the fire.

"It was a rotten shame the old girl chose this particular moment, Julie," he said. "She was having a tough time of it, and Joe knew I would hate to lose her. So—forgive me, my dear, will you?"

"Of course, Mike." She smiled at him; and he stood off and looked at her with naïve delight. "You look good enough to eat," he said. "You really do. Doesn't she, Toby?"

"You'd better try something more substantial, I'd say," suggested Toby mildly.

"Lots o' time for that," was the casual answer, and Michael hauled a dog out of the chair before them: "Sit down, Julie. You must be tired."

Julie shook her head and slipped down into the chair that was still warm from the body of Michael's water spaniel.

"Now—go ahead, you two big things," she told them.

"You are both aching to talk farm and sheep and top-dressing. Don't let me stop you. I'm a farmer, too, remember."

With a laugh Michael dropped on to the end of the fire-bench close to her knees. But Toby strolled over to the piano, in the corner, and sat down before it.

"Here's something you'll like, Mike," he said, and plunged into a wild, lawless thing, with a lilt to it, that died suddenly to the whisper of a song, like the voices of lovers. He broke off and laughed.

"What's that?" shot out Michael. "I like it, all right. What is it, Toby?"

"Gypsy—"

"Play it again," said Julie briefly, "or go on with it . . . more of it, anyway."

"You're the one who ought to be here," demurred Toby; but he played it again.

Julie watched Michael, his head upflung, staring into the corner where Toby was. His hand, on the bench, was close to her knee. Unconsciously he moved it and touched her. A shiver ran through Julie. . . . And he was not even thinking of her. She dropped her eyes to hide away his face, and there, upon the hand in her lap, winked the ring he had slipped on, a few hours ago. . . . "Soberly, advisedly . . ."

Toby had stopped, as suddenly as he had begun. He got up and came back to stand looking down at the two by the fire: "I don't suppose you'd play a bit, would you, Julie?" he asked tentatively. "Sing just one song?"

Julie knew that Michael, too, was looking at her. He put his hand on her knee, but he said nothing. Could it be possible—? She looked swiftly up, to find his eyes, smiling, alight, just hopelessly friendly.

“Will you, Jude?” he begged, using the old-time child-name.

Something happened, then, in Julie. Something dauntless and forceful: she would do it—be Michael's wife, in Michael's way, and take the consequences. . . .

“You two foolish people,” she said lightly; “of course, if you want it. Only, sit where you are.”

She got slowly up and left them there before the hearth. Sitting down at the piano, she seemed to consider them for a moment, as though from far away; then, with a fugitive smile, she said almost dreamily: “I'm not going to ask what to sing. I think I may know. . . .” Michael got to his feet, as she played a few quiet chords. With no more warning than that, she began to sing.

It was a cradle song, known and loved by all of them. The crooning lullaby, that hushed some little, unseen baby to sleep, floated out in Julie's delicious voice, filling the old room and strangely stirring the hearts of the two men who listened.

The last lovely minor note trailed away, and died. “God, Julie, I'd forgotten—” whispered Michael. But Toby said nothing. Not a word. Julie got up from the piano, and Michael, with shining eyes, was going to meet her. “You're wonderful,” he said.

She held out her hands to him, quite simply: “I think I'll go to bed,” she said. “Good-night to you, Michael.”

Her hands still in his, she turned and spoke to the

man before the fire: "Good-night, Toby. Thank you for entertaining me, and for your toast."

He looked at her for an odd moment of silence, from where he stood; then, drawing in his breath sharply, he gave a short laugh. "Don't thank me, Julie," he said.

Arm in arm, Michael and Julie crossed the hall and went on in silence up the stairs to the room that had once belonged to Naomi. Inside, a lamp shone, a fire burned with fitful, drowsy flicker, violets stood in an old blue bowl upon the table beside the bed. At the threshold Michael stopped. He turned Julie to him, and put his hands upon her shoulders.

"I want to make you happy," he told her quietly. Then unexpectedly he leaned and kissed her.

"You won't mind, just this one night," he said gently, and turning away, he left her.

4

After Julie and Michael had gone, Toby stood just as they had left him, leaning a shoulder against the narrow shelf above the fireplace, his eyes fastened on the empty doorway, through which the two had passed arm in arm. For suddenly, with vivid intensity, his mind had gone back to the last time he had seen Julie, on that spring afternoon more than five years ago. He had been storming up and down, like a caged tiger, in that old room in the house tucked under the hill. At last, because of the very stillness of the girl at whom he raged, he had come

to a halt before her. He remembered now exactly how she had looked. The light of the setting sun, in a long slant through the open window, had touched her hair to burnished copper, as she held her small, fine head high, and looked at him with those green eyes of hers, that could be so remote. But they were not so, then. They were filled with a sort of quiet sorrow, with no shade of pity to wound him. That look had told him, more than any words, how hopeless it all was—how utterly hopeless. . . . Until to-night, he had not seen her, nor even heard from her, for five years. He had thought it was quite over and done with. . . . He would fool them all, and come home. . . .

Suddenly he lifted his head and gave an unhappy laugh. "*I'm* the fool!" he said to the empty room. A dog stirred. He looked down ruefully, and gently tapped with his foot Michael's black and white setter. "Well, old man, I guess that's that," he said.

At the sound of footsteps he turned his head, to see Michael standing in the doorway.

"Come on, Tobias," the latter invited genially, "let's forage. I'm starved."

Speechless, his face filled with blank amazement which was lost on his brother's back, Toby moved slowly after the retreating figure, across the hall, down the passage to the old kitchen in the ell.

Michael disappeared into the pantry, where the ice chest stood. Foraging upon Hannah's well-stocked larder, he hummed the song Julie had just sung. There came the occasional subdued clink of one piece of china hitting against another, as he lifted and moved the things

about. Without a word Toby had draped his long person on the corner of the kitchen table. The light had waked the canary in the cage that hung in the window, above some pink geraniums. It gave a sleepy chirp. Then Michael was crossing the kitchen, and Toby saw that he was grinning, like a successful marauding little boy. "Good hunting," he said, as he dumped a bottle of ale on the table at Toby's thigh.

There followed some bread and cheese, and the leg of a cold turkey. "Have some?" he asked.

"God, no!" Toby laughed in spite of himself. "You forget the marriage feast. I was at it, if the groom was not."

Michael had got a glass and was pouring out some ale. "It was a rotten piece of luck," he agreed, "but Julie wouldn't mind."

"Perhaps not. I grant that you may know the ways of wives better than I." He shrugged his shoulders. Michael, unconscious of any hidden meaning, was wielding the turkey leg. He looked up with a twinkle in his eyes. "I suppose it was a bit of a surprise, finding Julie here for keeps—"

"Rather," said Toby.

"You see, it happened quite out of the blue, after her father died," Michael explained.

"I see—" (Toby didn't see, in the least, yet). "Did Byrd leave anything?"

Michael shook his head, and took some bread and cheese.

"What about Julie? Does she know?"

"She'll never have to." Michael fed a crust to the cocker puppy.

"The place was probably mortgaged to the hilt," observed Toby, half questioning.

Michael nodded.

"Won't she have to know that?"

"Why?"

"You mean, you hold it?"

"I did— It's Julie's now," finished Michael serenely, and he looked up, with a sudden smile, at his brother.

"Catechism over?" he asked, amused and friendly.

"You like to hide your light under a bushel, old Cock, don't you?" came the crisp retort, and before Michael could take him up, "You're pretty much of a philanthropist, at heart."

The puppy, with Michael's help, had at last achieved his lap. Michael looked slowly up to the quizzical eyes above him.

"One doesn't think of a thing like that as—philanthropy, Tobe. Julie is my wife, you remember."

"Yes—I remember," answered Toby evenly.

Michael, holding the cocker against his big chest, looked over the puppy's head.

"It hasn't knocked you up, old fellar, has it,—my getting married?" He put the question quietly, his eyes searching his younger brother's face. —"It's not going to make a bit of difference between you and me," he assured.

Toby made no direct answer to this. Sitting there, swinging a long leg from the corner of the table, he looked soberly down at Michael.

"I hope things will turn out as you believe," he offered enigmatically.

"What do you mean?" Michael spoke with slow wonder.

"My God, Mike, you must admit that you are doing a rather unique thing."

Michael's eyes darkened curiously. "In what way, Toby?" He was unconsciously pushing his brother into a corner.

"Why, man, you don't love each other—you and Julie.—Do you?"

"No," said Michael briefly—simply.

A sudden flush darkened the younger man's weathered face: "You're not even living together," he burst out, facing Michael as it were from the corner where he had been pushed, his back to the wall.

"How can that possibly matter to you?" said Michael steadily. "Julie and I are satisfied."

For a moment Toby was silent. The clock on the wall ticked solemnly. A sleepy chirp came from the canary's cage. At last Toby stirred, with an impatient push of his supporting foot.

"It—doesn't seem decent!" he shot out.

A spark of anger flickered in Michael's eyes. Then suddenly it touched off a flame of laughter, that licked up and broke over his face.

"Good Lord, Toby—have you turned prude, playing with all those woolly sheep of yours? If it isn't decent for a man to have his wife live under his roof—regardless of the room she picks on—what, in heaven's name, *is* decent?"

"Sorry, Mike," said Toby, "to have said anything. It's none of my damn business." He got up from the table, strolled over and sniffed a geranium, his back to Michael.

"Toby! Look here—you young idiot!" Toby swung slowly about. "Though I'll not say it's none of your damn business, I'll vouch for making it mine—to see that Julie doesn't regret this. I'll do anything in my power—I swear it—to make her happy. —Yes—*anything*. If you can honestly help, at any time, I ask you, now, to do so. I ask you, too, to stay here at Windyhill this winter. I need you, Toby. That is,—" he smiled suddenly, whimsically, "if the 'Red Gods' don't call too loud. Wait for the 'spring fret', at any rate." He held out his hand. "How about it, Toby?"

A curious look swept Toby's face. Then he laughed. He strode across to Michael, and putting out a hand took the one held forth to him.

"Right!" he said, and then, surprisingly, "God knows I owe you something."

"Don't be an ass," said Michael.

Chapter Two

I

JULIE stood at the head of the stairs, where she had quietly come, and looked down into the hall below. A shaft of sunlight fell across the cherry-colored geranium in the east window, and lay in a slanting patch along the floor. A newly lighted fire snapped and crackled upon the hearth, and before it, with lifted head and expectant eyes directed at Julie, lay Michael's water spaniel. Her tail slowly brushing to and fro, she waited further developments. A smile flickered about Julie's lips, and died. Still she stood there, with one hand resting on the smooth knob of the newel post.

It was unmistakably Sunday. Except for the sputter of the fire and the slow tick of the clock, all was still. A waiting, almost palpable quiet brooded over the old house.

It was suddenly broken. With a wheeze of warning, the clock began to strike. Eight o'clock. Fanny got up,

and humping her stern, stretched her fore legs, then pulling up with slow deliberation, shook so that her ears flapped and the ring on her collar clinked against the buckle. As Julie came on down the stairs the spaniel yawned cavernously and padded across to meet her. Leaning over, Julie caressed the dog's chocolate-colored head. "We're going out," she announced briefly. "Everything's asleep but you and me."

Outside on the low step she stood for a moment while Fanny trotted leisurely about sniffing the morning world to see if it had changed over night. It was surprisingly mild. Already, with the sun but an hour high, the snow had begun to melt, showing a gleam of ridiculously green grass along the wall of the house. Fanny finally took herself galumping off around the end of the kitchen ell, and then, as Julie still waited there for a minute without moving, three chickadees lighted a few yards away in a curve of the ruts, and had a little chirping gossip while they pecked a hurried breakfast from the seed that Hannah always threw out for them in the winter. At last, with the brief inconsequence of chickadees, they flew off. Julie stirred and lifted her eyes to the hill, lightly covered with snow, that rose before her in a long slope, to thrust its wooded crown against the sky. "I love it," she whispered. "If only—" But resolutely she shut away more thoughts leading in that direction. . . . Somewhere beyond the hill church bells were ringing. Julie walked slowly off along the snowy ruts of the lane.

Without once looking back, she climbed until she came to the gate into the road, and looked across to the farm barns on the other side. Three pigeons, a white and two

russet ones, took their deliberate way along the ridgepole of the bigger barn. Reaching the end, they flew off with subdued clapping of wings, to light, one after the other, on the top of a silo. Some Guernsey heifers, in the yard, wandered aimlessly, bunching together, then meandering farther, in the desultory way of their kind. It was very peaceful. For the moment, no human being seemed to be about. Julie turned and looked back.

On the left of the lane the orchard climbed almost to the road,—gnarled apple trees, with crooked, well pruned branches. Michael was keen in his knowledge of fruit trees, and had worked hard to preserve these old-timers. At the foot of the orchard lay the gardens, and beyond, against the old brick wall that shut them away from the house, were some frames, and an ancient potting shed covered with lichen. Right at the corner, its smooth gray branches sweeping down over the shed and wall, grew a huge silver beech.

Directly below stood the square old house built of brick. Windyhill, with its group of tall pines rising up darkly to make a well-known landmark. Smoke rose slowly, faintly blue, from the big middle chimney, and from the chimney in the wing of silver-gray, weathered clapboards. The kitchen, and Hannah frying fish balls, thought Julie with a smile. Then her eyes went on down the hill to the river flowing in a wide sweep past great hemlocks on the farther shore, and, following the curve of wind-ruffled water, were caught by the flash and wink of gold. It was the weather vane of the Sheridans' house, tucked away in a fold of the hill.

At that moment the ubiquitous Fanny came bounding

up. Julie gave an amused little laugh. "Come on, girl," she said, "Breakfast." She started off jogging down the lane with the delighted dog.

As they passed the pine trees the front door opened and Michael came out. Catching sight of him, Julie slowed down, and Michael stepped forth to meet and greet his wife, with only a stir of pleasure, and no realization that such a necessity was unique. His eyes dwelt happily upon the approaching figure, and suddenly he laughed:

"Mornin', Julie. Whither away?"

"Mornin', Mike," answered Julie, and then lightly, as she, too, laughed (he was so nice to look at in his blue clothes and blue-and-white spotted tie,—so big and friendly), "Dutiful wife, running full tilt to meet her husband," she told him.

Without more ado he took her hand and drew her arm through his. Thus they made their way to the open door, and went in.

From the hearth in the hall, where he stood with his back to the fire, Toby gave them cheerful greeting. "Mornin', Cock and Hen. Did you grub up many worms?"

A slow smile broke over Julie's face. "The chickadees got 'em all," she answered serenely; and then, "But why 'Hen'?"

"What else?" was the calm retort. Toby shrugged and shot a look of secret amusement at his brother. "Always called him Cock. . . . You're the wife—" he shrugged his spare shoulders again, as though to show how inevitably what he would say followed—"What else but Hen? Do

you always rise at break o' dawn?" he finished mildly.

"Is he often such a goose, Mike?" asked Julie, in mock despair.

"Often," was the sober answer. Then, with quick change to laughter,—*"Come on in to breakfast."*

Julie never forgot that breakfast. Sitting there at the head of Michael's table, she poured coffee from the old silver coffee-pot into the thin, handleless cups of old blue Canton. She had to ask Michael how he liked to have it. Which fact, though it seemed strange to her, and significant of her anomalous position in his house, he took entirely for granted. Sam, much titivated, in a new black coat and obviously new shoes (a faint, sly squeak went with him wherever he trod), watched her slightest need, in a manner almost embarrassing, and yet very touching.

The two men, frankly ravenous, between them tucked away countless crisp fish balls and, it seemed to Julie, as many eggs. They were incredulous that two of Hannah's fish balls, and not even one egg, could possibly satisfy one's Sunday morning capacity.

Once a wave of strangeness, at her surroundings and the circumstances thereof, swept over Julie. She loved Michael. She was Michael's wife. But these very facts, now that she was living under his roof, she realized, with a stab of dismay, set him further away from her than before. Suddenly, in the curious way one's mind at such a time grasps on little things, she pictured Michael in his own room—a room where she had no place, which she had not seen for years—standing before his mirror, in his shirt-sleeves, choosing a tie, thinking a man's thoughts, entirely disassociated from her woman's mind. He was

leading—he would go on leading—his own separate life. She would have to watch him leading that life, longing to be a part of it, but outwardly accepting—everything.

“Are we all going to church this morning?” Toby’s question plunged itself into the middle of Julie’s thoughts. She turned to Michael. “Are we?” she asked.

Michael was in the act of taking out his cigarette case. He offered it to Julie, and produced a light: “Would you like to?” His eyes were on the flame held against the end of Julie’s cigarette. The process of lighting accomplished, Julie looked up at him. “I always do,” she said simply. And then she smiled. “I’ll have to, now, anyway, to watch you come sedately in, on the heels of old Mr. Partridge.”

“Is he still at that?” Toby blew a shaft of smoke ceilingward. “Mike’s terrible virtuous, Julie.”

Michael caught Julie’s eyes, and grinned. “Because I don’t lift a dollar now and then out of the contribution box?”

“No,” put in Toby calmly, “the whole shooting-match. Think I’ll go and watch him, Julie—proceedin’ decorously up the aisle. I’ll walk,” he announced.

2

It seemed so strange to Julie to be sitting in a different pew in the old church where she had gone so often with her father. Those paneled, box-like pews, painted white, with each its door; the narrow, red cushions, the long, narrow footstools, covered with crimson carpeting, that

had a way of tipping over at the most inauspicious moments. So many times, as she had sat in her father's pew in the east transept, she had seen Michael's mother, gracious, slim, and reposeful, and Michael's tall father, walk up the aisle, followed by their two big sons. Had watched the face of Michael's mother, lighted by a sort of humorous and whimsical amusement, and seen a hand thrust forth with deft help, as her men coped with the getting off and stowing away of bulky overcoats, in the businesslike way of their kind over such acts in church. Now she was sitting beside Michael, in that pew—another Mrs. Michael Cochrane. It seemed unreal to her, and hard to believe. But to Michael, apparently, as though it had always been.

Once, as they prayed, kneeling side by side, his shoulder touched hers. She bowed lower and asked, with sudden fervor, that she might not fail him . . . and unconsciously Michael moved away. All through the sermon—the text was taken from Isaiah, the beautiful convincing words from the mouth of the prophet, of those who believe: “. . . ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace”—she kept her eyes fastened upon the fine upright figure of old Mr. Partridge, standing there in the pulpit, his silvery head thrown back, the flowing lines of his long, black robe falling away . . . conscious always of that other figure, beside her, sitting quietly with folded arms, one big shoulder pressing against the paneled end of the pew.

. . . Eight months ago, at the foot of the steps before the altar, shut away forever, had lain all that was left of her father. She closed her eyes for a minute, and saw

again the boughs of apple blossoms—because of all flowering things he had loved them most—covering him there. A wave of fresh anguish swept over her now. She would never see her father, on earth, again. . . .

Yesterday, before that altar, she and Michael had taken each other for better for worse, to love, honor, and cherish. The swift and solemn trust of life, for each, was now more great, whether or not it was acknowledged. . . . Julie saw Michael lean forward for a hymn book, and became suddenly aware that the sermon was over. The hymn sung, they stood side by side, with bowed heads, for the benediction. . . . Toby was putting on his coat.

Outside, on the steps of the church, were Naomi and Pip. Beyond, talking to a tall old man, was Ambrose Sheridan, with little Martin.

"There's Uncle David," whispered Toby. "Isn't he splendid?"

A pair of eyes, as gray and fine as Michael's,—strangely like—had seen them. The old man was smiling straight at Julie. In another moment his hand held hers. "I'm *your* Uncle David, now," he said. "Don't forget, Julie." Julie had known him always. She loved him from that moment.

The next minute Toby had claimed David Cochrane and was wringing his hand. "Is the rover going' to stop long enough to trot over for Sunday-night supper with the old man?" Julie heard him ask Toby.

"I used to think of those suppers, out yonder, and mourn for 'em, among my woolly lambs," Toby chuckled, and shot a mischievous look at Julie, "I'll come back and tell you and Mike all about it."

Uncle David's eyes twinkled. "You'll do nothing of the sort. You won't have to."

Julie smiled into the kind old face. "Do you mean it?" she asked.

A moment later Pip slipped an arm through hers and was walking her down the steps. "I've got something for you, Julie," he confided in his cheerful way; "a sort of weddin' present. Born last night. —You'll like the little beggar. She'll like you, all right, when she sees you." He gave her a look of naïve approval, that ended in a most engaging grin. "Her eyes aren't open yet."

3

"I never saw a lot of people who looked so much alike," observed Julie.

Lunch was over, and Toby had disappeared. Michael stood with his back to the fire, his hands deep in his pockets, a pipe between his teeth. Not a Sunday-morning Michael now, in church-going apparel, but dressed in a pair of ancient breeches and sagging tweed coat with roomy pockets. His eyes, amused and peaceful, had been following Julie's slim, black-clad figure, as she strolled about the library, fixing a spray of freesia in the thin old flip glass on the desk, stopping before an etching of ducks lighting in a marshy pool, pausing to run her eyes lovingly along the rows of books in the bookcases, and coming to stand at last by the golden-brown wall-flowers in a copper jar, that Naomi had put there on their wedding day . . . yesterday. She had stooped swiftly to bury her nose

in a fragrant clump of the flowers before her, then straightening up had looked at Michael. Her eyes had gone on to the portrait of Michael's father, which hung above the fireplace, and then it was that she had given forth her opinion on the Cochrane family-likeness.

Michael's face broke into a slow smile, that finished off in his eyes. —Not because of the words. He knew they were true. But for the way they had come. . . . He *was* extraordinarily like the man in the portrait above him. His hair was more brindled, but it, like his father's, was parted in the middle, and had the same springy ripple, somehow like that of a little boy. There was the same strength of jaw and chin, the rather thin-lipped mouth, that being strong was yet humorous. The long, gray, Cochrane eyes and finely cut, aquiline nose. Perhaps the son Michael was a trifle the bigger of the two.

He turned now to look up at the painting. "I can't touch him, as a man, Julie," he said.

It was a portrait of a man in pink coat and buckskin breeches, a copper horn thrust between two buttons of his coat. In one hand he held his velvet cap and long-thonged whip. Sunlight slanted across his head and shoulders. Behind him were the somber, russet branches of an oak tree, and between these gleamed patches of wintry sky. At his feet, one standing, and one crouching low, were two splendid hounds.

Julie's eyes had dropped once more to Michael. "Finesse and Fable," he murmured, still turned away from her and looking up at the portrait. "Two grand bitches." Then, facing about: "You remember when Father hunted his own pack here, don't you, Julie?"

"Of course I do. I remember you, too, Mike, the day I was first blooded, coming up on a blown, brown pony, you and the pony covered with mud. You grinned when your father handed me the brush, and said, 'Good for you, Judy! I fell into that damn brook.' I can remember now how your father laughed out: 'Better luck next time, Micky!'"

Michael gave a delighted chuckle. "By Gad! I do remember it. What a whizz you are, to have it all so pat!" She saw his face grow suddenly sober, and his eyes went over and past her to the lift of the hill. "Do you know, Julie, there never could have been two happier people than my mother and my father. . . . God, how they loved each other!" he finished, almost as though he had forgotten Julie were there.

Julie's heart seemed to have taken up its beating in her throat. She saw a flicker of something strange go over Michael's face. He brought his eyes back from the window and slope of hill, to look at her.

"Julie," he said, "come and sit down for a minute. Will you? There is something I would like to say to you."

Julie knew a moment of suffocating wonder. Then quietly, and without demur, she came. The cocker puppy, pushed from her warm nest, jumped promptly back into the next best thing—a lap, and Julie absently pulled her close, in a curled-up ball.

Michael sat down on the end of the bench, close to Julie. He twisted about to knock the ashes from his pipe, then turned to look gravely at her. Her smooth, ruddy hair gleamed against the moss-green of the old chair, which background made her eyes look like bits of the

sea, and enhanced the clear pallor of her face. "What is it that you want to say to me, Michael?" she asked. "Tell me, will you?"

"Yes—Yes—" He spoke slowly, almost absently. Then, as he still looked at her, a smile crept into his eyes. "You have a lovely face, Julie," he said.

Nothing in the world could have more surprised the girl before him. Wanting the whole so badly, she instinctively shied away from the half loaf.

"Is that all?" she countered, unconsciously provocative in the tilt of her head and the glint of teasing amusement in her eyes.

Michael grinned. "No; that's just the take-off. Got to *land* somewhere—not in a *brook*, this time."

"Well—" she encouraged, and watched him.

His eyes dropped to the pipe he held in his hand. "Talking about Father and Mother—how happy they were together—made me think of it," he began . . . "I realized, suddenly, that I might—that being married to me might cut you off from . . . all that."

A swift shadow clouded Julie's eyes; but Michael did not see it. She looked quickly down to the dog in her lap, and Michael went on simply: "If such a thing should happen, Julie,—your finding that you loved someone—in that way—remember our compact up there at the gate yesterday . . . that I'd never stand in your way. Will you promise to tell me?" he asked, suddenly lifting his eyes to find Julie's head bent, the slow color flooding up into her temples. For a minute, as he waited, he knew an odd flash of apprehension. Then impulsively he laid his hand on her knee.

At that, Julie's head came up. She met his look squarely, though a curious expression passed over her face. Then she gave him a smile, that held a gleam of mischief. "A compact is usually a *mutual* affair, Michael," she said. "Ours, I think, was so. We each have to keep the knots out of our own end of the rope. . . . It's not a tug of war, though, Mike,—all pull, and no giving in. We both have our own bit of that to see to."

"You're putting me off, Julie." Michael leaned forward, and with his hand under her chin, gently tilted her face, and smiled down into it. "I trust you, my dear—to tell me," he said, and dropped his hand to stroke the dog in her lap.

"And *you*, Michael—" she parried, "will remember *your* part of the bargain. . . ."

"Oh, me," Michael laughed, "I'd rather have a good friend, like you, Jude, than—anything else. If *you're* satisfied, *I* shall always be." He was looking at her. "I'm happier than I've been for years," he said. And suddenly, curiously, he knew that what he said was true.

He got to his feet and stood looking down at the girl and the sleeping puppy. "How about a ride?" he asked. "Would you like to go over the hill to the old house, and see—how everything is? We have lots of time before tea. Naomi expects us there."

"I'd love to," said Julie gratefully, and then, on a note of soft laughter: "Pip has a wedding present for me. It's eyes aren't open yet."

"Pip's inimitable." Michael grinned. "He must have talked old Topsy into littering a day or so before her time."

"Topsy's certainly a most obliging lady," laughed Julie. "My wedding present was born last night."

"She's a sister of Fanny—much more up and coming," enlightened Michael.

"Fanny can have the chance to be 'a kind old aunt'," said Julie. She got up and put the cocker puppy down in her chair. "I'll be ready in a minute, Mike."

4

He stood in the open doorway, waiting for her. It was more like spring, than late January. The sun, having done away with most of the snow, had gone behind a trailing sheen of cloud in the high west, slipping out, ever and again, to wash with gleams of watery sunshine the patches of winter rye on the shoulder of the hill, and to catch for a moment, in a misty sparkle, the weathercock on the barn. Before him, on the wet grass beyond the drive, Fanny and the black-and-white setter played about in elephantine coquetry, with a large pale bone for go-between.

. . . "Ought to have put in more rye," thought Michael, and heard footsteps on the stairs. He turned, to see a slight boy coming briskly down.

"My things are a hundred years old, Michael," Julie confided.

"Such things should be. They're perfect," he told her with conviction.

They were. A neat coat of dark gray, over a soft shirt with a black tie. Her slim legs, thin at the knees, like a

boy's, were encased in a pair of whipcord breeches, old, indeed, but faultlessly cut, and a pair of delicious brown field boots. She had pulled down on her head a gray felt hat with a black ribbon tied around the crown. The only color about her was the surprising green of her eyes, and a gleam of hair beneath her hat. Michael's eyes lighted with unconscious approbation. "I told Joe you'd ride Solomon," he said. "Do you mind walking up? I usually do," he explained.

"You mustn't treat me like a guest, Mike." Julie sent him a look of whimsical entertainment. "It's much too hard to live up to." An answering grin went over Michael's face. "You're right, Julie," he said. "Do you want gumboots? As Marty says,—'mud's come'." Julie shook her head. "I don't want a thing," she said.

Outside, Julie sniffed the air. "I can almost smell buds," she observed. "I heard a phoebe in the hemlock beyond my window, while I was hauling on my boots."

As they passed beneath the spread of the biggest pine, a blue jay flashed forth with a scream of derision, that seemed to mock at the very idea of a phoebe in the hemlock. Michael and Julie walked along the lane (mud *had* come) that climbed to the road. The dogs, thrilled to be going somewhere with Michael, had long ago reached the gate and disappeared.

Looking up, Julie caught sight of a buggy drawn by a pair of gray horses, moving along the road above. A Goddard buggy, and a pair of horses, was no longer a common sight, even of a Sunday afternoon, in the country. Julie watched the horses being pulled up at the gate. She smiled, inwardly, and shot a glance at Michael. He must

have been aware of it, for, with a smile, he nodded his head. "We're in for it," he said, and chuckled. Then seeing the whip flicked up in a salute, he gave an answering wave of his arm. "Jane's heard. I'll bet a nickel on it," he announced.

"Rash man!" murmured Julie.

"You sly dogs!" came the awaited challenge, in a woman's husky voice. They were still twenty yards from the gate. "Hurry along up for the Challoners' blessing." A woman, in a tweed coat and bulky, moss-green muffler, was leaning forward, beyond a hatchet-faced man, who drove. Her own face was as thin and weathered as a stable boy's, and wrinkled now with a humorous smile.

"Hello, Jane," said Julie calmly, as she came on.

"Can't have a stable secret that doesn't wing its way to the ears of Jenny Wren," teased Michael. "Hello, Josh."

The eyes of the man so addressed twinkled at Julie, over Michael's head.

"So you're going to put up with old Cock!" he greeted. "You could go further and fare worse."

"Hold up, Josh," laughed his spouse. "Come round here, Julie. I want to look at you."

Smiling, Julie did as she was bid. She trod gingerly round through the mud and slush, and came to stand at the far side of the buggy.

Jane Challoner held out a loosely-gloved hand. Laughing, Julie put hers in it, and found it powerful.

"It's the nicest thing that could have happened," said the husky voice. "Toby told us—back there," she jerked her head to indicate some point over her shoulder. "Popped

over a wall, bringing most of it about his brogues. I couldn't have given more of a gasp if the 'Old Man', himself, had suddenly appeared. I haven't had two such surprises, at one crack, for many a moon. . . . Nice!" she said emphatically, and leaning swiftly, kissed Julie. Then turning toward the two men, she broke up a discussion on silage and early ploughing, by holding out her hand to Michael. "Bring her over soon, Cock," she said; "I loved her before you did."

Giving Michael no time to refute this remark, she let a pair of pale blue eyes, alight with humor, come to rest on the hawk face beside her. "We'd best be going, Josh," she observed, "an' let the 'Cocks' get to their riding." Josh Challoner grinned tolerantly at Julie, and they moved off, leaving the Cochranes smiling after the departing buggy, with its original and entertaining occupants.

"Great pair!" said Michael. "Damn shame they never had any kids!" he finished, quite innocent of the fact that he had proposed—if not, perhaps, for the same reason—an analogous lack for his and Julie's unique partnership.

A queer expression flickered over Julie's face, and was gone. "Nice people," she said quietly.

Michael slipped an arm through hers, and they crossed the road, together.

"That's a beautiful heifer," remarked Julie, coming to a stand at the corner of the barnyard, where a fawn-colored yearling wandered alone, nosing and blowing gentle snorts at a pool of melted snow beyond the fence.

"She should be. But the best of it . . . she really is. The little bull calf, of last night's 'borning', is her full brother. If he turns out the way he ought, we'll keep

him." They moved slowly on to the open door of the barn.

Julie drew in a deep breath, and her eyes went along the line of stalls beyond. Vast, and dim after the outside world, the barn stretched off into the delicious depths at the end, where the hay went up and up into a dusky half light and pigeons cooed in remote tranquillity along the beams. An amber-colored cat came stalking to meet them. She stopped halfway, and sitting down began with infinite care to wash her face. Somewhere in the recesses beyond, the stanchion of a cow clanked. The peaceful munch of oats went drowsing forward from unseen mangers. A pitchfork and broom stood beside a blue-green pail against a whitewashed partition of thick old boards. In the corner, under a deep-set window, stood a vast grain bin, its paint faded with time to a smoky blue. Along the top lay another cat, black as coal, and apparently asleep. The faintly choky, dusty fragrance of hay, the good smell of clean horses and cows, caught at Julie's throat. It brought back carefree, joyous times . . . so much that was now no more. . . .

"Like it?" Michael was asking, quietly happy, at her elbow.

"*Like* it?" Julie filled her lungs deeply, in answer, and they moved on down the barn toward a space of three box stalls.

A small bandy-legged man, with a tan collie at his heels, was coming to meet them. It was old Joe. Before the first box stall Julie spied Michael's retriever, sitting bolt upright, quivering with expectancy. The setter was nowhere to be seen. Julie held out her hand to the little

man before her. A horny palm met hers, in an awkward, slimy shake. But the man's ruddy, hard-bitten face shone with ingenuous pleasure.

"It's a glad day for old Joe, Miss Julie, to be calling ye Mrs. Michael," he said simply; "an' to think ye'll be here ever an' always."

"Thank you, Joe," Julie answered gravely. "You were always a good friend of mine." She smiled, with a sudden twinkle of mischievous reminiscence. "Do you remember how beautifully you fibbed for me the day I broke the shaft of the old red breaking-cart?"

Joe gave a warming chuckle and shot a look at Michael. "'Twas a raggety flick o' white paper the wind whipped in the pony's face . . . that done it," he offered, with a splendid slow wink at his master.

"You haven't forgotten your lines, Joe," laughed Julie delightedly, forgetful of the present, in the impish doings of her past.

Michael turned and opened the door of the box at his elbow. "Got on Mrs. Michael's saddle?" he asked, rubbing gently at the satin-soft nose thrust out to him. "Come on, old man," he coaxed, as he unfastened the snap-hooks from either side of the bridle and led the pony out to where Julie waited.

Joe had slipped into the next box and was leading out Michael's temperamental brown pony, "The Djinn",—the most enterprising pony for bucking when the mood was upon him, and the most engagingly, innocently mild when it was not.

Julie rubbed Solomon's bony forehead and ran her hand down his neck. Then, taking up the single snaffle,

she climbed agilely up, and, with a sigh of happiness, settled into her old saddle.

As Solomon trod sedately, with subdued clump of hoofs, toward the open door, Julie heard slight skirmishings behind, and a short-lived clatter of hoofs on the hollow-sounding floor. Then she was in the squelching yard, and an amused Michael, on a brown back suspiciously prone to hump, was pulling up the nose of 'The Djinn. "No you don't!" he warned. Sidling, with much swishing of a thin, ratted tail, but without a buck, Michael got the pony through the yard, and, side by side, he and Julie turned into the lane that ran past the barns, up through the hemlocks, to the crown of the hill, and over.

They didn't go, after all, to the old house tucked away in its orchard on the farther slope. For, on the top of the hill, where the road came out of the woods on to a clear sweep of pasture land that dropped to a twist of brook, Julie sent a wistful glance to the house below, crouching with cold, smokeless chimneys in the shelter of a wide-spreading hemlock, and then said simply: "I don't think I'll go there to-day, Mike."

"We'll go round by the place in the brook we used to dam," Michael's eyes were fastened on the crest of a distant hill, "then along beside the river, to fetch up at Naomi's. It's four o'clock now," he finished ingeniously, still without looking at the girl on the gray pony.

"Michael, Michael," thought that girl, "how beautifully kind you are, my dear. I love you for that, too." But looking at him, she only said, "And there's Pip's small blind bundle of a wedding present waiting. . . ."

Michael turned laughing eyes upon his wife. "Pippin

will be the little beggar's name," he said. Then swinging their ponies to the right, they both cantered over the field, along the ridge of the hill. At the edge of a wood they pulled to a walk, and facing the trailing clouds that swept across the westering sun, dropped down through patches of juniper and low cedar, to cross the old-time spot in the brook, and so came to the river road. Snow still lay in the lee of its tumbled stonewall. With a whirr, five pheasants thundered up. The Djinn shied as though he had never seen a bird before, and they were plunged suddenly into the colder gloom of hemlocks . . . the everlasting whisper of their somber branches.

5

Julie had somehow forgotten how low the ceiling of the old room was . . . or perhaps it was because so many big men were wandering about under it. It was all so just right: the mellow, bumpy plaster of the walls, the dim, smoky beams, and the splendid fireplace; the wink and gleam of copper, the books, the faded old materials, soft and lovely of color, and flowers, of course—always, for Naomi. The Challoners were there, and Johnny Dick. She and Michael had been welcomed with a storm of greeting, that was so spontaneous and friendly that it had all seemed natural and unembarrassing. The big angular figure of Ambrose Sheridan, in the act of bending to cope with a rolling log on the hearth, wheeled about and strode across to Julie. A twinkle behind his steel-rimmed spectacles, and the words, "Take off your hat, Mrs. Michael,"

being his only warnings, he had swept her up in a brotherly hug and kissed her squarely on the mouth.

"Always wanted to do that, myself," announced Johnny Dick to Naomi, who was near by. Then: "Here's lookin' at you, Julie!" he called, and he tipped up a tall glass he had in his hand (it was innocuously filled with milk), quaffed the contents at a gulp and flicked the glass over his shoulder on to the hearth, where it fell with a splendid crash. An old beagle leaped ponderously from a drowse, and fled, with down-clamped tail, for the door, and safety.

"Look here, you Johnny," laughed Naomi, "do you know that ends our family of tall glasses?" Martin was on his knees, gingerly picking up the pieces. He looked up at his mother with an ill-concealed twinkle. "Just what I needed," he confided, "to finish doin' something."

"It's a poor smash that doesn't bring someone a few lucky pieces," observed the irrepressible Johnny.

"You can't take her yet, o' course," Pip was whispering in Julie's ear; "but you got to see her, just the same—afterwards. Don't forget."

"I'm going to call her Pippin," Julie turned to tell him. "Michael thought of it."

"Mike's a dabster at naming things," his nephew retorted, with an appreciative grin.

At that moment Toby came in through a doorway at the end of the room, beyond the group about the fireplace. He bore a tray, apparently heaped with muffins and stacks of cookies. "'ll this do you?" he asked, of the room at large, then over his shoulder to Tim, "Put down that kettle o' water, kid, before you fill your shoes with it."

"I haven't spilled very much," was the mild answer.

"We've all had some, Julie dear." Naomi lifted her head with a fleeting glance of explanation. "They came in from a paper chase—on foot, as hungry as though they hadn't stowed away a round of beef a few hours ago." She shrugged, with a gesture of amused tolerance. "Sit down Julie." Then, in the act of lifting the kettle, her eyes were caught by a gleam of metal and tangle of leather straps draped over the back of the chair Julie had chosen. "Take that bridle out of here, someone. Who put it there?" She raised her eyebrows and mutely shook her head.

Johnny Dick reached a long arm and slid the bridle clinking over the back of the chair. "Toby said to bring it along an' he'd mend it for me," he explained, with a grin.

"Well, it isn't likely to get mended on the back of that chair," answered Naomi tranquilly. "Where's the horse that belongs in it—wandering about the house?" Micky, reaching for a cookie that had rolled under the table, gave an explosive snort of laughter, somewhat muffled, fortunately, by the position of his head in relation to the floor. "Come on up into the daylight, Micky," said his mother calmly, "and pass some muffins to Julie. . . . The toe of your muddy boot is pinning my best slipper to the floor." With an elephantine and scrouging withdrawal, Micky humped out stern foremost; and turning about, still on his knees, good-naturedly proceeded to do as he was bid.

"Did The Djinn buck much?" he asked. "He always does, goin' down hill." Smiling, Julie shook her head.

What a deliciously inconsequent and original lot they

were, these men folk of Naomi's,—Naomi, herself. A sort of beautifully happy, amused content seemed to radiate from her wherever she was, thought Julie. —Was it just Naomi? or was it what happened when you loved a man—and he loved you . . . ? Unconsciously her eyes sought out Michael, to find his broad shoulders dark against a western window. He was deep in conversation with Josh Challoner, his hand resting naturally upon Jane's thin shoulder as he talked to her husband.

"Come, Mike, get your tea!" called Naomi, at that moment.

Instantly, as a boy would, he turned, and, with a parting shot, came over to where Julie sat. He dropped down on to the arm of her big leather chair, and sitting sidewise, propped up by one long leg, swung the other and drolly awaited his tea from the ministering hands of his sister.

"Had a nice day, children?" she asked, her eyes bent on the sugar-bowl as she reached for a piece to put into Michael's cup.

"Perfect!" said the latter, with surprising conviction. Julie could never seem to help her heart doing queer choky things in her throat when Michael was near her. It was fluttering about now in a way that suddenly made her angry. It couldn't do things like that, right under everyone's nose. It shouldn't! She reached for the tea-cup on its way to Michael, and handed it on to him. "We rode over the farm hill and along the river," she told Naomi. "The sky was all misty gleams of trailing cloud, and the river, under the hemlocks, was shining and dark, at the same time."

"Three cock pheasants, with two hens in tow, rocketed

up out of that clump of juniper where the wall's tumbling down," put in Michael.

"Woods are full of 'em, this year," offered Micky at Julie's elbow. "There's a funny whitish-lookin' hen about. Have you seen her?"

Michael swung a long leg, and, between gulps of burning hot tea, threw a sly question at Johnny Dick: "What's happening in the market, Mr. Ticker?"

A groan came from Johnny.

Then Jane's husky voice: "Yes, tell us." Josh went on playing a game, at the window, with little, eager Martin. But he was listening. What he didn't know about the fluctuations of that cruelly tormenting institution, the market—was not so very much. Johnny's version of it would be amusing.

"It's dropped. I thought the Bulls were going to take it for a ride," came the words mournfully, and Johnny's shoulders went earwards. "I'm broke—honest-to-God broke."

"At last? Really, Johnny?" asked Toby, quite soberly.

"Laugh while you may, young fellar!" was the retort. "But if that's the only thing you do, those old woolly sheep of yours, off yonder, won't be comin' home so dutifully waggin' their tails behind 'em . . . when you get back there again. They won't be there to wag—anything. They'll have gone—like every other thing in this pernick-erty old world—to the blazes!"

"As bad as that?" said Toby meekly.

"You've hit the nail, Johnny Dick," put in Jane Chalonier. "This old spinning top of a world has been sleeping at it for years. The first wobble came in the war . . .

caught itself, spun on . . . wobbled again. Now, just like any other top, it's running wild before it wobbles and stops—spinning." With a flicker of amusement in her pale eyes Jane subsided and lighted a cigarette.

"Good goin'!" said her husband, and turned back for a play.

"Oh now, Jane—" protested Naomi. "The world's not so bad, or so different. There's nothing new, in itself, in anything that's happening. More talk—brazen, perhaps . . . even bald, but—" She shrugged her shoulders. "There's lots of goodness and kindness left,—and decent, clean people, doing clean, decent things. . . ."

"I think Naomi's right," defended Julie. Michael screwed round, with his arm lightly touching her shoulder. She knew he was looking down at her. She felt it. . . . "But one thing seems, to me, *not* to be just the same—" She rested her head against the back of the chair, and her eyes were strangely luminous beneath the darkness of her lashes as she looked across at Naomi. —"When we were little, and later, not little, but pretty young, we had a certain religion. Not one that was prim or prudish . . . or that we necessarily talked about. . . . But it was there,—a faith in something bigger than we—God, if you will. . . . We still have that faith," she went on quietly, convincingly, "something to turn to—something bigger than we. But—so many of the generation younger seem to have lost all that. Lost their hold on—the only thing you can hold on *to*. They don't admit, or appear to need, anything—bigger than they."

There was a moment's hush; then Michael spoke:

"You are right, I think, Julie—beautifully right— 'Something bigger than we'—" he quoted slowly.

Naomi nodded, her eyes thoughtful. "Yes, she's right."

Toby had turned his back upon them all, and was staring into the fire. He wondered suddenly—with all his brave show of casual fooling—how he was going to stand being so near to Julie. God! He shivered. How alluring she was . . . and how utterly unconscious of it. . . . She was fearless, too. Look at her now. *He* couldn't have said that. And it was true. *He* was a bit like that, himself. . . .

She was talking again. He listened hungrily to the delicious throaty voice. She was answering some idea Jane had put forward, and that he had not caught. . . . "It's a curious thing, though, Jane," he heard her say, "and a very telling one, to see for what this country, *en masse*, will pay the highest price. A moving-picture star would sniff at the salary for a *week* that this country gives to its President for a *year*. A prize fighter, or a star batter on a professional baseball team, would laugh in the public's face at the thought of a salary such as we so blandly offer to a judge in our Supreme Court. Let the President skin along as best he can, on \$75,000 a year! Let the judges who interpret our laws, the ministers and professors and doctors, who care for the souls, form the thoughts and administer to the bodies of America of to-morrow, make the best of a sorry bargain . . . so that the children of to-day, by the movies and the prize ring, the smuggled goods of the bootlegger . . . and speed—speed, above all, and at any cost—may be entertained, and feed their selfish, pleasure-loving bodies!"

"Julie—Julie—Julie—! when do you think out all this?" asked Naomi, amazed.

"Often," said Julie simply. "I believe it, Naomi."

"And the best of it is, she's not afraid, or ashamed, to say it," put in Jane Challoner with frank admiration.

Julie lay back, quietly smoking a cigarette, her eyes gone off through the western window beyond Naomi. She was thinking, far from them all, suddenly, of her father. *He* had been unafraid. . . .

"Here you are," said a voice at her elbow, and Pip, silently come, bent to show her something. Julie found herself looking down at a tiny blind ball of brown fur curled up in Pip's nice careful hands.

"Oh Pip—" she said, and for the queer tightness in her throat could say no more.

Chapter Three

I

OF all Michael's household the member who paid most marked attention to Julie was Michael's black cocker puppy, Tess. (Anything less like her namesake of the D'Urbervilles, than the little lady in question, would be hard to imagine; but it had been Pip's turn to produce a name for this last addition to the dog family, and he had, at the moment, been wrestling through this particular book—for school. Thus the short tag, for a short-legged little dog person.)

From the moment of her finding herself in Julie's lap, all unexpectedly, on their arrival in Michael's car, after they had been married, Tess had taken the owner of that lap unto herself. It fooled with her and scratched her in the right places, and had a new kind of lap, where one could stay comfortably curled up without suddenly, in the middle of a nap, slipping disturbingly through. She followed Julie like a shadow; and on the second night

flagrantly deserted her blanket in the corner of Michael's room. . . . As Julie was getting ready for bed, the door she thought was safely shut, brushed slowly open. A black nose was thrust in, followed by a small black body, that came wagging its way toward her, sidewise, like a crab, in an ecstatic curve tipped by a flicking, stumpy tail.

"Why Tess," said Julie, turned half about at her dressing table. With a bound the puppy was in her lap, and had given a little darting lick to the tip of Julie's nose. From that moment, Tess was Julie's dog.

For the rest, the household took her in with cheerful matter-of-course . . . glad to have her there, as if she had been a sister come back to take up the threads that a woman in a household inevitably takes unto herself. It was as though she had always been there. The Toths, Sam and Hannah, were eager for her help, and had early and ingenuously sought it.

On Monday, when Julie went into the kitchen to say good morning and thank Hannah for all she had done, the delighted old woman fairly beamed, as she led her to a rocking-chair beside the window filled with geraniums, where the canary chirped and pecked in his cage above.

"It's where Miss Naomi sat, and her dear mother before her, God rest her soul! when seein' to the orderin', of a mornin'. . . . God be praised!" she said fervently, "to see it filled, this minyit, with Mr. Michael's wife." And Julie understood. Smiling with a certain wistfulness up at the friendly face, she took, perforce, the unsought reins thus thrust into her capable hands. The reins of her husband's house.

"A house without a woman in it is a woeful spot, how-

ever you try to lighten it," Hannah confided. "Men and dogs is wonderful careless of mud and such. And Sam says ye've put a lightness and a brightness over all, in one short day. Sam and me was thinkin' if so be we could fix up Miss Naomi's room for two, ye'd take good comfort. Sure, that wee small room of Mr. Michael's could make no space in the quare parcel o' guns and huntin' things he have ransacked to himself in his man's way." Reaching suddenly to save a bit of cuttlefish from falling through the wire of the canary's cage, Hannah failed to see the slow flood of color mounting in Julie's face. "What a grand day it will be for us whin Mr. Michael has a son!" she observed in naïve conclusion to her train of thought. "He's had a lonesome length o' years, and growd used to goin' his lonesome, man's ways," she explained to the mute girl who leaned to caress the head of the puppy pressed close to her knees. "But ye'll soon learn him others," she went on with simple confidence, "an' bless ye for it, Miss Julie. Sam an' me loves Mr. Michael like as he was the child we never had."

Julie raised her eyes, to find that Hannah had taken off her spectacles and was fumbling at them with her apron. Her heart filled with despair at the known short-comings of their life together-to-be—hers and Michael's—a surge of longing swept over her at the old woman's words. She got to her feet and went to Hannah. With rare tenderness she laid her arm about the faithful creature. . . . Moved by this new version of Michael's life, out of her suppressed love for him, she spoke simply and in perfect faith. "I'll try to make him happy," she said a little unsteadily. And, leaving Hannah smiling through her tears

at her friend the canary, she went away, wholly forgetting why she had been led to that rocking-chair beside the pots of pink and white geraniums.

But Hannah, too, had forgotten. She was seeing a boy-child with Mr. Michael's gray eyes and crisp, shining hair, as she had seen *him*, long ago. Her thwarted mother love was satisfied with this child of her own brain . . . Mr. Michael's little son-to-be.

Something fell with a tiny smack onto the floor at Hannah's feet. She came back abruptly to her surroundings. With a happy sigh, she bent and picked up the piece of cuttlefish.

2

Up in the room that had been Naomi's, Julie stood by the window looking down over the hill to the river. Propped against a leg of the old wing chair at the side of the fireplace, with her hind legs sprawled sidewise in the limp fashion of cockers, sat Tess. A patch of watery sunshine slanted across her small person, and on along the floor. It faded out, momentarily dimming the room. With her eyes fastened hopefully on Julie's back, Tess waited. . . .

A boisterous wind swept up from the river, and caught at the branches of the hemlock by the corner of the house. Julie could hear the swish of it, as the boughs sprang upwards; and saw the sheen of needles, in a short-lived burst of sunlight. Then blurred shadows chased up over the hill, and once more dimmed the earth.

The interlude of Saturday and Sunday now over and,

as it were, her wedding a thing of the past, standing there on that everyday Monday morning, Julie knew a sharp moment of blankness, an access of bleak hopelessness. A thinking human being, with plenty of courage, she was faced suddenly with the future. Putting aside the jumble of thoughts and troubling doubts that had been seething, only half suppressed, through her mind, she pulled herself together and squarely met the present. . . . In a moment of madness, she had married Michael. For better, for worse, she was now Michael's wife. If in name only, that she had known before . . . and accepted. She had chosen with open eyes. The only blame lay with her. She knew now how heavy a blame that was. . . . Because of her love for Michael, which should have made it impossible unless he, too, cared for her . . . like a drowning man clutching at a straw, she had grasped a quarter loaf . . . forgetting that it might also become such for Michael. He had offered her, in good faith, and with a fine simplicity, the honor of his name. . . . And she had taken it . . . with God knows what hopes.

Why had he done this thing? she asked herself now. Was it, in some altruistic way, to protect her? If only her father were there! Ah—but if he had not died, this would never have been. . . . Then a sickening thought caught her,—a sharp thrust of fear. Could it be—that Michael had had to help her father?—that he had found how very little there was for her now? The hot blood flooded up in her face. It *couldn't* be that. —God! . . .

. . . How like him it would be. And how could she ask him such a thing . . . now? What must Toby think? Thank God he had got over caring for her. How im-

possible a situation if he had not! . . . Michael was so frankly delighted to have him back. He had told her so, and said that Toby would stay there until the spring.

Suddenly, as a gleam of reason in the confusion of her mind flashed the thought of her compact with Michael . . . not to stand in each other's way. . . . She must not allow things to become distorted. That sort of thing did no one any good. She would keep to her bargain. She need never stand in Michael's way. . . . She would play the game. As long as he was happy at his part in that game, she would have to trust him, and "play fair," as he was doing. There she would leave it. . . . And then, her eyes focussing on the house tucked away in a fold of the hill, with a rush of thankfulness she remembered Naomi. She caught the glint of the old weathercock, as it spun about in the wind that flattened out, with a swoop, the smoke rising from the end chimney. In the yard behind, she saw a flutter of blue—boys' shirts, flapping on the line. Simple, homely things—stable and sure, going steadily forward. Naomi, with her lovely face and laughing eyes, her sure hands and big way of looking at things, carrying on. She, too, would do her best. She swung about and saw Tess crouching by the old chair. A rueful smile crept into her eyes: "Come on, little lady," she said. "No more of this. We'll trot over the hill to the house by the brook. You've never been there, you know," she told the happily wriggling puppy, as she pulled on a soft fur cap and got down a leather coat. "It's nice there, Tess . . . but you mustn't go for the rabbits in the orchard." She laughed down at the puppy. "Remember!"

3

Michael walked Solomon along the lower road by the river, where yesterday he and Julie had gone. He was on his way to the ten-acre field on the other side of the river, where they were putting down dressing. He could hear the creak of a cart now, and the plod of hoofs on the planks of the narrow bridge beyond the bend. Solomon, going sleepily, the reins lying on his neck, fumbled a foot in a rut that had frozen over night, then trod on through the tinkling of thin ice, where yesterday a puddle had been. Twenty yards ahead, in the middle of the road, Jinny, the lemon-and-white setter, had come to a point. Michael pulled up and got off. The pony, nothing loath, stood where he was, his head thrust down, sniffing at the ruts. Michael, with a gleam of satisfaction in his eyes, walked quietly up on the pointing setter. She had begun now, half crouching, to move stealthily forward, on a slant, toward a clump of junipers. Once more she froze into a perfect point, and held it. Slowly Michael passed her. He had not gone three yards, when, with a thundering whirr, two cock pheasants got up, followed by a hen, and, tipping to avoid the branches of a pine tree, sailed out over the river. Michael twisted about to watch the dog. Would she hold the point? "Gad, that's good, for a puppy!" he whispered. Then: "All right, Jinny." The young setter came up to him.

Hoofs were jogging toward him, horse and rider hidden by the curve in the road. Michael heard the clink of

breaking ice. Looking up, he saw that it was Jane Chalon, on the wicked ratty pony which she rode on every occasion with the amused delight Jane reserved for wicked ratty ponies. Of which ilk there seemed a perennial supply.

"Mornin', Janel!" he called. "Wait till I get Solomon out of the way of that she-devil's heels. —What you up to?" Jane pulled up, much to the flighty one's disgust, as shown by the flattened ears and fidgety sidling. "Don't be an ass, Vix," she said, huskily nonchalant, (Michael was hauling Solomon out of the way), and almost in the same breath, "Working. . . . Just the way you are, Mike." Her face crinkled in a grin, which Michael answered in kind, no whit disturbed. "Did you see the point the puppy made?" he asked. "I did not," was the answer. Then Jane laughed. . . . "I don't believe you have a thought in that brindled head of yours but dogs and horses and top-dressin'. . . . Books thrown in," she conceded tardily.

"No—" he said, slowly mocking, "not one. The third item comes first, at the moment. I'm goin' over the river now to see 'em at it."

"Your old ten-acre field, I suppose—!"

"You've missed your vocation, Jane," observed Michael mildly. "You ought to be dressed like a gypsy, selling baskets and asking—" (he let his voice slide into an obsequious whine) "Want your palm read, lady?" Then, drawing Solomon well up at the side: "Pass, woman, on your busy way—and keep that vixen's heels out of my face."

"Where's Julie?" Jane asked with a chuckle, and without making a move.

"I don't know," said Michael simply, pulling up the head of a pony asking for trouble, and looking at Jane caught a quizzical glint in her pale eyes. "Should I?"

Jane let her glance rest on him while a slow, incredulous smile broke over her face. "You're incorrigible, Mike!" she said at last, and shrugging thin shoulders, she grimaced humorously down on him. "Most men, I think, would know a little thing like that, two days after they were married." . . .

Michael kept his eyes upon her, without a flicker of answering fun. "Julie's not like that," he said. "We—" and there he stopped. . . .

"Like what?" Jane snapped him up, disregarding the unfinished "we—", "We're all alike . . . when it comes to that. . . . You can't take any of us too much for granted. . . . The poorest of us is like to fool you, if you do."

"Poor Josh!" murmured Michael in droll commiseration. . . . With flattened ears, and tail swishing, the mare trod warily as a cat along the frozen ruts, passing Michael.

"Poisonous little rat!" he taunted. "I'll send her a red ribbon to pin in her tail feathers—for her next birthday present."

With perfect equanimity, the thin figure in breeches followed the antics of the sidling mare, adroitly keeping down a pair of feather-light heels. As they went, Jane sent Michael an inimitable glance over her shoulder. "Take Julie out with you, Micky. She might *like* top-dressing. Ask her, anyway," was her parting shot.

Michael got on Solomon and walked the pony toward

the bridge—and the ten-acre field. The wind was rising, with a souging swish in the big hemlocks overhead . . . a sudden gust, from over the river, blew a spit of hail in his face. He turned up his collar absently, his mind on the words Jane had flung him across her shoulder. Why *hadn't* he asked Julie? Not because he hadn't thought of it, as Jane had implied. He *had* thought of it, and then— It was because he didn't want her to feel she had to go messing about on the farm unless she wanted to. . . . *Had* he taken things for granted? Taken Julie for granted? . . . But he didn't pretend to know anything about women . . . except Naomi—and Jane . . . and, he had supposed—Julie. Perhaps it wasn't going to be quite so simple as he had thought. . . . And then he knew, for the first time, that he hadn't really thought, at all . . . except to hope that Julie would be happy. And suddenly there rose before him the picture of Julie's face as she had sat that morning pouring out his coffee,—her head tilted, her eyes smiling a question at him from under her dark lashes. So enchanting, so amazingly adequate, and yet, as he remembered her now—somehow aloof. She's my wife, he thought with quick wonder, and I don't really know a bit about her! With a thrust of pleasurable surprise, he spoke aloud to the ears of old Solomon. "I'd *like* to know—" he said.

And then, having come to the bridge, being Michael, he turned to the work at hand; as it were, pushing something pleasant into the back of his mind. He jogged Solomon across the planks of the narrow bridge and rode out into the field on the other side . . . simply Michael Cochrane, keen head of a big working farm.

4

On foot, Toby had accompanied Michael and Solomon part of the way up the hill behind the barns. Where a path struck off eastward, through the woods, he had stopped. Standing on a hump of frozen earth and matted leaves, he laid a hand on Solomon's spare gray withers. "The stand of pines on the hillside, behind Byrd's old house?" he questioned.

"Yes," said Michael. "Put your mark on the lads you think ought to go." Michael sent him a look, quizzical, amused. "You still love trees, Tobe?"

The eyes of the latter, alert, alive, had gone past his brother's figure, on Solomon, into the depths of the hemlocks beyond . . . he nodded, half absently. "Trees," he murmured. Then, with a sudden grin, he looked up at Michael. "Yep," he said, "I like 'em . . . Well," he flicked a hand along Solomon's quarters, "I'll be seeing you," and turning, he left them.

. . . Lord, how many times he had come this way, to Julie's house! Five years was a long time. Long enough for people to die . . . and get married. . . . But what was the use of getting bitter about it. If he could only understand it! . . . Why had Julie married Michael—if she didn't love him? It was as clear as day why old Mike had married Julie. Even if he were a bit of still water—and Toby knew he was. Michael wasn't so deep that he, Toby, hadn't been able to see bottom. Altruistic fellar, Mike! He had a lot of courage, too. —How in God's name, though, he could have Julie for his wife, and

not love her, was to him utterly incredible. —But there it was. . . . And Julie, herself? What went on in that sleek head, with its flame of hair? What, behind those long eyes of hers, that could be so candid, and, again, so withdrawn? . . . He never had pretended to make Julie out. But, Lord, how he had wanted to—(his face flushed hotly at the admission) how he wanted to now! . . . Her very friendliness, so spontaneous and easy, given so frankly, and with such trust to him now . . . while its very simplicity put him miles away . . . hurt unspeakably. . . . He bit hard on the stem of a pipe he had forgotten to fill; then took it out of his mouth and put it away in a pocket. —The gay inconsequence of the two of them! Just as if—I don't know, he thought miserably. If they were satisfied, why the devil should he fuss, or jib at the uniqueness of the situation? . . . Then, with a swift reversion: Good God! he was human. He loved her as he never dreamed of loving her before—and she was Mike's wife. If she loved Michael! he thought contradictorily, it wouldn't, somehow, be so damned hard to swallow—but—she might just as well have been *his* wife . . . who did love her. . . . What a wretched mess he was caught up into. He owed Michael—everything. Michael had asked him, in all good faith, little knowing the torment he thrust upon him so innocently—to stay at Windyhill. How could he go? He couldn't. He'd just stick it, somehow—until the spring. But he'd got to keep a tight rein . . . damn well keep his fingers out of the pie that had been made while he was away. “Thank God Mike never knew why I went away,” he thought fervently. “There's that to hang on to.” . . . He was suddenly brought to a sense

of his surroundings by stubbing the toe of his heavy brogue on a rock sticking up in the needle-covered path. The hobnails on the sole slithered with a grinding rasp over the rough surface. He laughed ruefully. "Blind old fool!" he muttered. "Ought to know that bit of rock . . . used to bump my chin on it when I was no bigger'n a hop-toad."

He had reached the top of the hill. Standing under the branches of a tall hemlock, he looked across a wide, open glade. Alone in their glory in the open space stood three enormous silver beeches. High over them a sweep of windy sky. "God, they're lovely," he whispered.

Profoundly still, he stood there looking out on the smooth silver gray of the great trunks . . . the maze of fine, gray branches against the darkness of the pines beyond.

A lover of trees since a boy, with now a real and extensive knowledge of forestry, Toby had lost his heart long ago to beeches. Of all trees, his first and last love was the silver beech. And this spot, in the wide world, he loved the most. This hushed, hidden glade on the top of a hill, where three great beeches grew. . . . Strangely enough, the picture he held in his mind of these three big trees was always this,—their maze of bare branches against the darkness of the pines,—never the young feathery green of them in the spring. As every man has, in his mind, some place of safety and happiness to cling to—this was Toby Cochrane's. . . . He stood now, absolutely quiet, drinking it in . . . for the five years behind him—gazing at the actual trees, matching them limb for limb, twist and seam and bole—gnarled root and slope of ground beneath—to the vision he had carried in his heart. At last he

gave a low, happy laugh. "You've kept the faith, gray ladies!" he said, and walked slowly forth into the open—straight up to the biggest of the trees. Ducking under a sweeping bough, he laid a hand on the trunk. Somewhere high up among the branches a squirrel chattered rebuke. "All right!" said Toby whimsically, "I won't hurt her," and passing out on the farther side, he picked up the twist of path that went down among the pines to the orchard behind Julie's house.

For an hour, then, with understanding, and extreme care, he looked over the trees as Michael had asked him to do—for the ones that must go. He marked, with a piece of red cloth, more than a dozen tall pines, for the axe. Then emerging at the lower end of the wood, he went on through the orchard at the foot of the hill, and came to the old weathered house by the brook. With hardly a glance at the house, he walked on past some tall lilac bushes, ducked under the crooked branch of a hemlock, and found himself on the knoll over the brook. For a minute he stood there looking absently down. The ice went out a little way from the bank on his side. Beneath it the water made a hollow gurgling sound. A jay flew screaming out of the hemlock and darted, in a flash of blue, over Toby's head. But with his mind in a curious blank acquiescence of the world about, without any conscious thought, he stood for a space in that familiar spot, neither seeing nor hearing. . . . At last a chickadee lighted on a spray of juniper close by the brook. The cheerful "dee-dee-dee" brought Toby back to earth. He smiled, because he loved chickadees, and then his eyes fol-

lowed the sudden flight of the little black-capped bird over the field and hill beyond.

To the right of the knoll on which he stood, two old planks, covered with lichen, crossed the brook, to a path which climbed, deep bitten, athwart the shoulder of the hill. A low, juniper-covered hill against the eastern sky. Over that hill one might take a short cut to the town below. . . . Toby had the sudden fancy to climb the hill. He was halfway across the foot-bridge when he heard his name called, and turning saw Julie. She stood under the hemlock, grasping a low-swung branch. The wind had caught a strand of coppery hair from beneath her black fur cap, and had whipped a faint color into her cheeks. Her eyes were smiling.

She looked down to where, at her feet, Tess crouched with her tongue hanging out. "It's pretty far for us," she explained, "but we would come . . . and here we are."

Lord, how lovely she was! . . . and how puzzling, thought Toby in a flash of exasperation, even as he laughed down rather ruefully at the puppy in question.

"Where are you off to, Toby?" asked Julie.

Toby hunched a pair of tweed shoulders. "Nowhere special. What can I do?"

"Not a thing," she answered simply. And then added quietly: "I—I'm just going into the house." She turned slowly away . . . then looked back to ask, "Do you want to come, Toby?"

For some curious reason that he could not explain, Toby felt suddenly sorry for Julie. A new sensation was mixed up in his other feelings for her. Out of it he answered

against every inclination: "I'd love to, if you want me."

"Come," she said, and without a word he followed her. Past the tall, bare lilac bushes, along the stones sunk in the turf between great clumps of box, to the door of faded, smoky green. And following thus, in a hush of silence that seemed quite natural, there came to Toby a sharp sense of irreparable loss . . . a feeling of blankness and futility. It was followed by a blind flare of anger . . . and then he realized that Julie was having difficulty with the lock. At first she would not give up. He did not offer to help her . . . and after a minute she turned to him.

"I can't do it, Toby," she confessed, quite unharassed and without impatience.

Finally (as she stood aside without further words, that he might try to turn the key) Toby opened the door, and Julie went quickly by him into the house.

"Can I help you with anything?" he asked, standing in the doorway.

She turned to look back from the foot of the stairs, there in the dimness of the hall . . . vital and lovely, in the atmosphere of patient quietude emanating from old lovely things. A queer little smile hovered about her mouth. "It's a book I want, Toby," she explained, and went on up the stairs. The puppy went bravely scrambling after.

As Toby stood there in the doorway a gust of wind swept past him, and flapped, with a tiny rustle and flick, the tag on the old iron key in the lock he had just turned. Then, in the silence that followed, there seemed to creep out to him from the past, on noiseless feet . . . old, puzzling questions . . . that could find no answer. . . . With

a restless motion he shook them off, and saw that Julie was coming down the stairs. Halfway down she turned to look at a picture that caught the light from the open door. Toby watched her put out her hand and gently straighten it upon the wall. There was something in the act, intimate and loving, as though she were alone . . . and no one saw.

"I love that picture," she said, as her eyes met Toby's. "It was the first picture I ever had . . . of my own. I used to think the man in the pink coat was Father, and the little girl in a blue sash on his shoulder . . . me." She smiled at Toby, in naïve explanation.

"Did you find what you were after?" he asked, still from the doorway, as Julie came on down the stairs.

She held up a thin, leather-bound book. "Marcus Aurelius. . . . I can't get on very well without him," she confided, with a fugitive smile of excuse, and without looking around she passed Toby and went out. She waited while he shut and locked the door, and they went down the path together. . . . Beyond the lilac bushes Toby nearly ran into a woman riding along the lane on a fidgety, brown pony.

"Mornin'," said an amused voice. "Don't run us down, Tobe."

"Have it your own way, woman, at the beginning!" Toby flung out with a droll look at Jane Challoner, which she entirely ignored . . . likewise the implication. "Just saw your old man, Julie," she remarked, "makin' all haste to get into the same field with a cartload of manure." She gave a throaty gurgle. "Can't you stop him, Julie?—his crude, man, farming ways?"

Smiling, Julie met Jane's amused glance. "I rather like 'em. . . . I know just how he feels about manure," she said, and let her eyes, atwinkle with humor, rest on Jane's face.

Jane grinned and shrugged her shoulders. "Mike's met his match," she said mildly, giving in. . . . "I asked him where you were, and when he said he didn't know, I told him he was a ninny! . . . Bring him over to tea this afternoon, anyway, Julie." And, with a smile of great friendliness, Jane moved off on her crablike pony.

"Nice person, Jane!" observed Toby.

"Very—" agreed Julie with conviction. She was watching the departing figure on horseback, in her eyes a look of amusement mixed with—was it a sort of wistful envy? Toby caught himself wondering. Not a bit like Julie. . . . "Come on home, Toby," she said, swinging suddenly about. She tilted back her head and sniffed the wind that swooped along the lane. . . . "It's goin' to snow . . . and I'm hungry," she announced irrelevantly. Toby gave a great laugh. *This* was Julie—this flash of inconsequence, that went so oddly with her—but that nevertheless did go. It made her very human.

5

It was their first evening alone. Like an old Darby and Joan, each with a book, Michael and Julie sat on either side of the hearth, with the four dogs, in differing attitudes of abandonment, sleeping between them on the rug.

The fire on its deep bank of ashes whispered and chuckled, with ruddy flicker. A rising wind boomed now and again in the chimney and sent gusts of snow to beat with muted rustle against the windows behind Michael. Once a dog whimpered, dreaming; and for a moment its legs twitched in the ghostly, futile running of a dog's dream. Absently Michael stirred the sleeper with a gently rousing foot. Fanny, for she it was, gave a long tremulous sigh and settled once more into silence. . . . Michael slowly raised his eyes from the page he had not been reading for some minutes, to let them rest, almost absently at first, upon the woman sitting there at the other end of the hearth. She was reading, apparently absorbed . . . one of Synge's plays. "Riders to the Sea," she had told Michael. . . . He thought suddenly of the day he had given the book to Julie. Much stirred by that bit of life . . . stark in its somber reality, supremely portrayed in the simple and hauntingly beautiful words of the Irish poet, he had ridden over that very day, on a windswept afternoon in March, and they had read it then and there at tea time—he and Julie. . . . And now this girl, who had become his wife, was reading it again. His eyes lingered with approval and naïve pleasure on the down-tilted face above the open book. . . . All unaware of any such regarding eyes, Julie read of Mauryan and Cathleen . . . of Bartley's death in the sea. . . . And Michael, watching her, noticed the dark sweep of her lashes and how the firelight caught coppery glints in her smooth, parted hair . . . and blurred with its gentle flickering light the line of her cheek. How beautifully quiet she could be. It was a gift few people were blessed with,

Michael found himself thinking. And suddenly he knew a warm feeling of security and comfort, just because she was there. . . . Had he forgotten what need a house had of a woman? It had been sixteen years since his mother died. Naomi had been married three years before that. Then the war had come. He had been twenty-six, that winter in France. Because of the horses, he had gone with the artillery. Toby had left college to drive an ambulance. . . . A year later, when it was all over, and France lay blasted under a gray winter sky, he had come home—a captain . . . miraculously unscathed in body, but with dark places in his mind which he put away and never spoke of. . . . And the next year, on a day in the spring when the world was a place of feathery green and blue-birds were in the orchard, his father had died. How like him it had been, never to have told them what he had learned when they were over there in France. Great, strong Michael Cochrane had fought his fight alone. His pluck and will were stronger than his heart. . . . He had missed his mother, and then his father, with a sharp sense of loss. That, too, he had never spoken of. And then, with the farm left to him, he had lived there alone—except for the times Toby came . . . which grew fewer, until he went away to Australia for those five years just over. . . .

Now Julie was come to live there; and, for the first time, Michael found himself acknowledging the loneliness of those years, of which until this moment he had not been aware.

A hard worker, a great lover of books, his life taken up with the care of horses and dogs—loving the country.

he had never had time to analyze things very much. Women had never held any part in his life, beyond the women of his family,—his mother, whom he adored, and Naomi . . . good old Naomi, with her big-hearted, amusing ways, and sane, happy outlook. Always he had known Julie . . . a sort of other sister. They had all grown up together. Though Julie was younger, between Naomi and Toby, and Toby was six years younger than he. . . . How Naomi adored old Sherry—and he her. How strange it would be, he thought, to love a woman . . . to have her love you, in that way. Rather wonderful, perhaps . . . but—inexorable. . . . He realized suddenly that for some time he had been staring in absorption at Julie's face. A slow smile crept into his eyes, and stayed there. And then—Julie lifted her head and met his look. With simple disregard of it, she spoke in a sort of hushed awe of the book she held.

“I'd forgotten, Michael—how superb it was! Listen to this—” she dropped her eyes to the page before her and began to read, her voice thrilling to the words: “‘Michael has a clean burial in the far north, by the grace of the Almighty God. Bartley will have a fine coffin out of white boards, and a deep grave surely. What more can we want than that? No man at all can be living forever, and we must be satisfied.’” There was a quiver in her voice on the last words, and, when she had finished, she laid the book still open, in her lap, and her eyes, with the dark gleam of tears in them, rested unashamed on Michael's.

Something stirred in Michael. For a moment he felt strangely inadequate, and young,—younger than Julie.

With a misty sparkle in her eyes, Julie gave a little choking laugh, that was somehow sadder than tears. "If we could all feel that—" she said. Then, before Michael could make an answer, with one of the swift changes, so intriguing and so a part of her: "I'm thirsty, Mike, and I want a cigarette, too." She smiled quickly and shut the book.

Michael got to his feet and stood smiling back. "Milk, I suppose," he said, with a questioning tilt of his head.

"I'm afraid so, Michael—I've a shameful weakness for it," she confided with an engaging sparkle, and started to get up.

"Stay where you are," he said; "I'll fetch the child something. Come on, all of you—you've got to go out," he told the group of dogs that had come to life with cavernous yawns, stretchings and much strenuous shaking. Tess promptly sought Julie's lap. Whereat Michael, with a grin of sympathy, caught her gently by the scruff of the neck, up under an arm, and made off with her. The two setters followed with alacrity. Not so, Fanny. She crouched unmoving, her nose between her paws.

"Go on, you old lazy one," encouraged Julie. Very loath, the dog crept dolefully after the others. From the door, she cast a final glance of half hopeful longing toward the fire, shook thoroughly, and padded out into the hall.

Left alone, Julie got out of her chair and went nearer to the fire. A sudden gust of wind swooped down the chimney and sent the snow whispering in waves of sound against the windows. "Poor old Fanny," she soliloquized half laughingly, "I know just how she feels." . . . She pulled a low slipper chair on to the hearth, quite close to

the fire, and dropping into it rested her elbows on her knees. Then, with her chin in her hands, she stared before her. . . . A spark track was wending its way up the back of the chimney. This for a minute she watched, without a conscious thought . . . dreamily, until hearing Michael come along the hall, she leaned back, and stretching her slippered feet to the warmth of the fire, crossed a pair of slim ankles and waited . . . utterly unaware of the picture she made.

"Cinderella!" said Michael. He was crossing the room, bearing a tray, which he deposited on the end of the fire-bench nearest Julie; and swinging a long leg astride of the other end, sat down, facing her.

"Oh—" exclaimed Julie with delight, "it's the old hound pitcher!" She sent a slanting look, a quick gleam of amusement from laughing eyes. "How I did covet that pitcher when I was a child! Once," she added drolly, "I dreamed it was mine."

With a chuckle, Michael reached a long arm, and grasping the white, glazed body of the hound that made the handle of the pitcher, poured milk into one tall glass and then the other. Having done this, he set the pitcher down at Julie's elbow. "Well," he laughed, "you won't have to *dream* it any more. It's yours, from this minute." Julie took the squat pitcher on her knees and slid her free hand over its smooth, fat side.

"I love it, still . . . just as I did then," she said. "Those five black and white hounds scooting around over the strip of green grass . . . and the lonely huntsman, with one lonely hound, way behind. . . . He's just as lonely, and just as far behind, now, after all these years." She smiled

suddenly up at a much entertained Michael. "I'm an awful goose, Mike," she confessed, "about *things!*"

"I used to feel damn sorry for the poor old hound that got turned into a handle," said Michael. "Sort of Tantalus act. Always lookin' over the top . . . never getting any nearer . . . and having to watch milk being tipped away from under his very nose. Obliged, actually, to help you doing it. —Here you go," he said, holding out her glass of milk, and he pushed gingerly nearer, a plate filled with molasses cookies.

"Like 'em?" he asked.

"Watch me!" was Julie's answer.

He did watch, even as he munched a cookie himself, and slowly drank milk out of his tall glass.

"Would you care anything about riding around with me over the place to see the work . . . when I go, Julie?" he asked suddenly, apparently out of the blue.

Julie shot him a quizzical look over the rim of her glass. "Do you mind what Jane says, Mike?" she answered. . . . Was she teasing or was she not? Michael's weathered face crinkled in a grin. "No," he told her, "I don't, unless what she says happens to coincide with what I want."

"Oh—" said Julie demurely, "I see."

"Do you? I wonder." Michael set down his empty glass, with a tap. "I'd like it, Julie," he said with finality, "if you'd do whatever strikes your fancy . . . at all times. Ride or tie. . . . Will you?"

She gave him a half mischievous glance. "You're giving me pretty free rein, Mike. You might be sorry, you know—afterwards." . . .

"No."

"Well—" she agreed, quite frankly now, "I like to ride—at any time . . . and I like you— So," she shrugged deliciously, "you might have me wished on you a lot of the time." . . .

"I'll take that risk," said Michael warmly. He fed a piece of cookie to Tess, and got off the bench. "I don't suppose you'd sing something," he suggested.

"Michael, my dear," she answered, turning her face up to him, "I'm so beautifully sleepy, and so full of milk and cookies, that I'd sound like a drowsy bullfrog. . . . Do you mind, awfully, if I don't?" She smiled reminiscently. "I must have slipped down a quart of milk."

Michael stretched out a hand and drew her up out of the low chair. "Ride or tie," he assured her, but his voice was faintly rueful.

"Good-night, Mike," she said, suddenly become very gentle, and turning away, she left him staring after her with a puzzled expression in his eyes. "Good-night," he echoed as she disappeared into the hall.

In perfect innocence, sublimely unaware, Julie had made the first move in "playing the game." By her simple refusal to sing, because she was sleepy . . . going off, instead, to bed . . . she had left behind her a new Michael. A Michael who looked with a certain bewilderment at her retreating figure, conscious that an odd feeling of frustration stirred within him.

He listened intently to the sound of Julie's footsteps going up the stairs to the scrabbling accompaniment of the faithful Tess. Heard both growing fainter, and then the muffled closing of a door. Became, suddenly, sharply

aware that in his mind he had followed Julie beyond that door into the fragrant, firelit room,—and swinging abruptly about went straight to the piano and began to play.

The front door opened on a snowy gust of wind, and Toby came into the hall. He was met with the last notes of Julie's cradle song. . . . "She's playing to old Mike," he said, and very carefully shut the door.

For one moment he waited, listening. Then, with swift decision, stole across the hall and up the stairs, to his room.

Oblivious, Michael played on.

Chapter Four

I

HAVING, that night when she and Michael had drunk milk from the old hound pitcher, accepted, in the spirit in which it was offered, Michael's suggestion that she ride with him about the work of the farm, Julie had forthwith ridden or tied, as the case might be. . . . She had found herself happier at it than she would have thought possible . . . simply a comrade to the man she loved. A frank spirit of understanding, easy and unstrained, had sprung up and flourished. It was not love. . . . No; certainly it was not love. Julie could not imagine being loved by Michael—rather, she would not let herself dream—but it was a peaceful and quiet relationship, much more peaceful and quiet than her love for Michael. There Julie determined to let things rest . . . taking them naturally, as they came, day by day, without looking ahead to the future. She would follow Mike's lead . . . schooling herself to take what simple

bits of happy companionship came her way. Giving all that was wanted: no more. For very safety's sake—no whit more.

Sometimes, in those two weeks, she had felt strangely as though she were dreaming a dream . . . of peace and security, with somewhere at the back of it all a dim sense that if she waked— She would not wake! Just go on with the dream-quality of safety, holding fast to the elusive fabric of a thing that must not be shattered at any cost . . . for what was beyond.

She often found herself acting with a cool naturalness that held a little shock of surprise . . . taking for granted situations which if she once waked would be hopeless, and she helpless and past caring who saw. . . .

It was not cowardice on Julie's part, this clinging to the present. It was, rather, a conscious act of will power, and courageous. She had the rare gift, amounting almost to genius, of being able to sense what went on in another's mind. This she had always possessed, and with it the power to stand outside herself, as it were, and deal with circumstances, unbiased and impersonally. These qualities now stood her in good stead. Perhaps better than she knew. For in Julie there were no ulterior motives for what she did; but a spontaneity that was curiously convincing.

Being thus so much with Michael in his daily supervision of the big farm, with all its winter work now going forward, Toby had become for Julie just a natural part of the life, coming into it, going out of it, as the case might be. Her thoughts were not on him, beyond the first feeling of gratitude that he had forgotten all about the

past. She was not aware that she saw little or nothing of Toby, apart from these contacts which were simple and necessary in the day's work. Michael, she knew, was extraordinarily glad to have him at home again. Toby was glad to be there. . . . Had Julie thought about it at all—which she did not—she would have said that the only element which Toby brought to Windyhill was a happy one.

It was a Saturday morning. The January sun, in a clear and blameless sky, looked down on the big farm barn a-hum like a hive of bees. Whitewash was the order of the day, and every man Jack who could wield a brush was called into play to whitewash the inside of the main barn.

Sam Tooth, dragged from whisking a duster and dish cloth, looking, with his house-pale face poking out of an ungainly muffler, for all the world like a long-necked bird, perched at the top of a tall ladder. The tails of his muffler hung down over a blue denim apron. His trousers were hitched high, showing a pair of thin ankles encased in striped socks, and his feet, in a huge pair of rubbers, seemed out of all proportion to the legs they ended off. Sticking out of his mouth was a corncob pipe—empty, of course—which every few minutes he carefully shifted from one corner to the other. In spite of this impediment to comprehensible speech, he kept up a running fire of conversation with young Tabs, the gardener's son, who was not far away. Old Joe was hard at work, too, emitting now and then the hissing sound accompanying the grooming of a horse; and Christy, a taciturn

farm hand, who was hardly ever known to speak: a giant of a high-cheek-boned Swede, with watery blue eyes, a veritable hound for work. He chewed solemnly now on a straw. Once he took it out of his mouth and with grave precision spat into a crack of the floor. Over in the corner, by the old blue grain bin, with overalls pulled on over his tweed things and a felt hat pushed back on his head, Michael hummed a little tune and slapped steadily with the wide, wet brush. Once he tilted his head to look up at the scarecrow on the ladder above, and a glint of humor lighted his eyes. "Old magpie," he murmured with amused affection, and moved a pitchfork that stood in his way.

The door was open into the yard. The day was very still. A long patch of sunlight lay on the rough boards of the floor. Now and then a horse moved in its stall, and from the far end of the barn came the subdued creak and clank of a stanchion, as some cow stretched her neck and snorted into the bottom of the trough, in search of remaining feed. From somewhere high on the rafters came the intermittent cooing of pigeons. Slap, slap—on went the whitewash. . . .

Michael was now humming a song of Julie's. He was thinking about Julie—thinking that somehow she had brought luck to the old farm there on the hillside . . . An open winter, but plenty of ice to cut from the pond beyond the five-acre field, enough snow to haul the wood that was cut—and lots of sun for the young stock in the yards. — The hens had never done better, and there had been two fine heifers. God knew what all that meant in these hard times, he thought gratefully. He had looked out a dozen

times to where she stood by one of the farm wagons, painting it a rich blue. —Decent, and just like her to want to help like that! The best part of it, too . . . she damn well liked it all—old Windyhill. What luck that she did! Of her own accord, she had taken to it like a duck to water. He heaved a sigh of content and went on slapping the big brush over the boards before him. She had fitted right in, with no bother or fuss, and—yes, he liked having her about—surprisingly. . . . He wondered suddenly how Julie liked it. You couldn't ask, somehow, if she were happy. You just had to see to it that she was, he thought with resolution . . . work for it like the devil. . . . It wouldn't be so hard, at that, he reflected. Julie was intriguing. You'd never be bored with her for a minute. She went her way quietly, but she was unexpected. There was something deliciously incalculable about her . . . her mind took fascinating, unexpected turns. You couldn't be quite sure if she were laughing . . . or not . . . at things. But, Lord, how she could laugh *with* you!

With a last brushful, Michael had finished the corner by the grain bin.

Julie had come to the spokes of the wheel. Standing off for a moment, the brush carefully poised in a hand covered by a large white cotton glove, she surveyed her side of the cart, that gleamed with fresh blue paint. A small black beret pulled down on her hair, her black clothes hidden by an old leather jerkin of Michael's, over a heavy blue smock, with her head cocked in appraisal, her eyes, absorbed, fastened upon the farm wagon before her, she

looked like nothing in the world but a happy-go-lucky boy.

"That's all right," she said at last, with decision. At her words, a head bobbed up from the far side of the cart—a fair, tousled head, with a small red toboggan cap slewed to one side, the yarn rosette on top cocked perkily over one ear. It was little Martin. Martin, who Pip said could smell out a pot o' paint a mile away, and would go rushing off to it like an engine to a fire. He had got wind of the Saturday morning's painting bee, and had arrived while Julie was still at breakfast—to get his finger in the paint pie—more than his finger! A large blue daub reposed now on one cheek-bone. Another tipped his ear.

Julie gave a gay laugh, at the apparition rearing up before her.

"What's the matter?" asked Martin, rubbing the back of a gloved hand up and down his nose, thereby adding more blue to his already much-decorated person.

"The matter!" Julie's face broke up in a quick smile. "You look like an Indian brave ready for the warpath."

"Do I truly?" Martin showed genuine interest. His gray eyes left Julie's amused ones and traveled down over his stocky self, thus ducking his head for the moment out of Julie's sight.

"Damn it!" He was swearing softly, without wrath. "There's a big blob of it on my stocking." He heaved a gusty sigh and sent a comical glance over the cart at Julie, then suddenly burst into a little spurt of laughter. "Lucy'll give me the dickens," he confided with a fat chuckle.

"She ought to," answered Julie soberly; but her eyes

sparkled with ready laughter. Then bending to dip her brush into the pot at her feet, she began to paint the rim of the big wheel before her. . . . Her thoughts had gone to Michael.

"How soon do babies begin to come?" . . . The question, launched from the other side of the cart, brought Julie's head up with a jerk. . . . Standing on the hub of his wheel, his elbows hooked over the iron rim, Martin was regarding her with friendly and engaging inquiry.

"Come?" echoed Julie, sparring for time. "Come where, Marty?" And, even as she spoke, she heard the approach of horses' hoofs. Beyond the small figure leaning on the wheel, she saw that Jane was jogging a white pony into the yard. Beside her, his hand on her stirrup-iron, walked Toby.

"Is that the way you paint, Marty?" he called. The boy screwed about . . . lost his footing on the hub, and, with a rasping of buttons and scrabbling of feet, slithered to earth.

"It's Julie's fault, of course," murmured Toby in a confidential tone over his shoulder to Jane. "She's had Marty stuck up there in front of her, painting pictures on his face."

"I do see a horse," came slyly in Jane's husky voice, "trotting across his off cheek. . . ."

"Sure," abetted Toby; "an' there's a full-rigged ship, makin' heavy weather of it, on his upper lip."

"Geese—aren't they, Marty?" laughed Julie—partly with relief. That question of his was still hanging in the air, and diversion was to be welcomed. Toby sent a grin in their direction and walked on into the barn. And Jane,

for once on something that didn't sidle and fuss—a sober old pony who had in her day queened it on the polo field—moved over to the scene of action.

"Been to see Naomi?" asked Julie, renewing her efforts with the paintbrush.

"No— Been to see Mrs. M. Cochrane."

"Sounds funny, doesn't it?" Martin, in the act of squeezing extra paint out of the brush against the side of the pail, straightened up and took a step toward Jane. His face bright with an idea, he put out a hand to the pony's nose, and stroking it looked up at Jane.

"I was just asking Julie something when you came," he began cheerfully, "but I don't really s'pose— She's been married such a tiny bit of time, against you . . ." A sudden doubt clouded his candid eyes . . . "But they didn't ever come to you, did they, Mrs. Challoner," he said slowly.

"Bless the child— Is it *babies*, by any chance . . . ?" There was a look of great gentleness in the thin face turned to little Martin. He nodded gratefully; then overcome with sudden shyness, because things seemed to be getting solemn, he looked down to where his feet were planted. Julie went on painting, offering no help to anyone. She knew Jane had sent a glance her way. Did Jane know—or did she not? —Why should she?

"What is it you want, old man?" Julie heard Jane's encouraging voice . . . as though she were talking to a horse, she thought.

"You see—" answered the boy, gathering fresh courage, "Julie getting married to Mike made me think of it. . . ." He looked suddenly up into Jane's nice face. "I love tiny

babies, Mrs. Challoner," his clear gray eyes looked into the woman's blue ones. "That is—the only ones I ever saw, I did. . . . Something like puppies . . . so cosy and warm, and all squiggly. They make noises like pigeons and kittens an' things." He was warming to his theme. "We don't seem to have babies, ever, in our house . . . an' I thought that p'raps one might come to Mike's house, now that he's married to Julie. It seems to happen like that. Would you know how soon it could get there, Mrs. Challoner?"

Julie felt a wave of hot blood sweep up into her face, and hoped that Jane was not looking at her. Leaning in desperation to dip her brush into the blessed blind of a pot of blue paint, she heard Michael's voice from the barn doorway: "What's that young scamp trying to wheedle out of you, Jane?" He was coming out to them. What would Jane say?

But the matter of an answer was not to be left in Jane's capable light hands. Dogged small Martin was not going to be thwarted within sight of his goal. He wheeled about and faced the approaching Michael. "When d'you s'pose you an' Julie'll have a tiny baby?" he asked—and waited.

Instinctively Julie turned to Michael. For the fraction of a second his buoyant oncoming checked; a curious blank expression came into his face. Then he laughed . . .

"Only the Lord can tell you that, Marty," he said.

"Damn it!" rapped out Martin with comical impatience; "I knew nobody would know. . . ."

Her thin figure crumpled over the white pony's neck, Jane Challoner was sobbing with laughter. . . .

2

After a hilarious Sunday lunch (Pip and young Tom had been there), whereat the topics of conversation, in the manner of the Cochranes, had ranged with apparent ease and a curious continuity, from politics, hard times, and industrial recovery, to the bull calf and the best way to make a telemark turn on skis, Julie and Michael, with the two boys, had gone off on the ponies to see David Cochrane in his old house on the other side of the town. They had urged Toby, wholeheartedly, to go along; but Toby had said a smiling, though determined, no. . . . He might go skating on the river with Micky and Tim, or he might foot it off over the hills, somewhere. . . . So, perforce, they had gone without him.

He stood now in the end window of the library watching the four walk off up the cart tracks to the gate at the top, on their way to the barn and the ponies,—watching, really, Julie's trim figure, in breeches and boots, as she walked arm in arm with the irrepressible Pip. He wished, with sudden and sharp resentment, that he could walk like that with Julie . . . or else—as Mike had the right—and didn't. God! what a curious mess it all was! His lips twisted in a brief, sardonic smile, not often seen upon them. What a hell of a hard thing old Mike had so naïvely asked of him: to stay there . . . for a minute! Mike wanted him on the farm. That was the worst of it. He couldn't be such a damned ungrateful skunk as to cut and run . . . just because living under the same roof with Julie meant a sort of miserable hell of torment.

If Mike loved Julie—if she loved Mike—God knew that would be bad enough— But not this nonsense . . . like trying to keep out of the way of Mike's sister—and his. Good God, what a queer mix-up it was! . . . How would it all end,—and where?

. . . The two of 'em seemed perfectly happy—ridiculously content—with nothing. —He'd damn well have to keep his hands off . . . and ride straight. . . . With a quick gesture of impatience he swung from the window and walked out into the silent hall. He had entirely forgotten Micky and Tim. . . . Utter stillness reigned in the old house. No dog was about, not even the ubiquitous Fanny.

Cramming a hat on his head, he collected some gloves, and taking a stick from the corner opened the door and went out.

It was a good day. Toby, always conscious of the weather, had to admit that. Great clouds trailed out in a fresh and clearing wind. There seemed to be a sheen of sunlight over the hills and woods. The sky had it, too. A spontaneous love of it all stirred in Toby. For a moment the sight and feel of it cleared his brain of tormenting thoughts.

Before him the hill climbed in a wide sweep to the road and the darkness of woods against a windy sky. The snow was almost gone. Just patches of it were left lying along the north sides of the walls. It showed very white on the green of the winter rye, all the way by the wall at the top. Suddenly the woods beyond seemed to beckon to him. He thought of the beeches there, sheltered and waiting. "Right," he said aloud.

In the woods he found more snow. But it was crusty and crunched with a satisfying crispness beneath the hobnails of his heavy boots. Overhead, in the tops of the hemlocks, the wind sounded like the sea very far off. Once a rabbit whisked across his path, its white scut perkily aloft. And once, with a startling and raucous crow, a pheasant shot up and slanted off between the trees.

With a sharp thrust of gratification, he knew how much he loved it all—the woods, the hills, the river—all the places he had known and loved as a little boy. That, at least, was the same. He could keep all of it in his heart, still.

And so for the moment forgetting what life had let him in for, he followed the last twist of the path and came out by the hemlock on the edge of the opening where the beeches stood. Under the westering sun, the feathery grass sticking up through the light snow had taken on a ruddy tone. Long shadows crept out from the trees at the western end where he stood. The boles and lower branches of the beeches were in shadow, but the upper branches stood out luminous and silvery. A trailing cloud swept across the sky above the tops of the pines beyond.

Having stood for a moment as immovable as the trunk of the hemlock beside him, the thought suddenly came to Toby that he would look up Jane. With a last look at the beeches, he moved off along the path that followed the edge of the open space and plunged at the end into deep pine woods. Here the path began to drop downhill. Swinging along at a good pace, Toby soon came out at the bottom, into the open. Before him were the barns and paddocks, so out of all proportion to the tiny old house where the Challoners lived.

Jane was at home, for the sole reason that she had a bad cold. In the low, sheathed room at the back of the house, that had once been the kitchen, with the inevitable troop of dogs (mostly terriers), in the familiar aroma of leather and apples and wood fires, Toby found her crouched unresignedly by the huge fireplace, that took up, with its ovens and cupboards, one whole side of the room.

"God be praised for the sight of a human being!" was her greeting. And then: "Aren't colds the devil, Toby?" Here she fished an enormous silk handkerchief out of a tweed pocket, and blew her nose, vigorously, almost vindictively.

"The devil an' all, Jane," laughed Toby, and throwing his hat down, he made his way past four or five obstreperously welcoming dogs, and stood looking with vast amusement at the abject figure crumpled up in the wing chair by the hearth.

"Don't often catch you lying down," he offered as encouragement.

"Don't stand there staring at my red nose," snapped Jane. "Sit down an' talk . . . you'll have to do it all. An' make it amusing! I'll nod assent, between the sneezes." She gave a croaky chuckle.

Jane was looking reflectively at Toby's spare figure, now seated on the end of the long bench before the fire. An unwilling gleam of admiration flickered up in her pale eyes as they came to rest on his absurdly good-looking face. "Though mine eyes stream—" she said, with the sense of humor that never deserted her, "I can see you well enough. . . . I don't know whether it makes me feel worse or better to see anyone so shamelessly bursting with health." They laughed together, in the companionable

way of old friends. . . . Jane was the first to sober down.

"Light up, Toby, and get going," she suggested; "I can't even smoke, blast it! Josh is off somewhere exercising the colt and a few of the dogs, and 'Winnie the Pooh' is off seeing 'A'nt', down in the town. . . . We'll wrastle a dish of tea for me, and a long drink for you, when the spirit moves. Till then,—what's on your mind?"

While Jane had been delivering this peroration Toby had watched her with a curiously detached look, as though making up his mind to something. At the end of it he drew his breath in sharply and turned his gaze to the fire. Jane watched him shrewdly.

"How is it, over the hill?" she asked.

"What do you mean, Jane?" Toby went on looking into the fire.

"Stop sparring." Jane leaned back in her chair and rested her head against the wing. "I'm not up to it, Tobe. I mean just what you think. . . . Julie and Mike, of course. Your negligible answer itself proves something. But we'll let it drop there, perhaps."

"No, Jane," said Toby, looking quickly up. "But you'll have to give me a lead, of sorts. . . . Country's new to me, and a bit blind."

Then, without waiting for the lead, Toby went on soberly: "Mike's pretty deep, Jane, though he seems so simple. He doesn't blurt 'em out, but he has reasons for things. If he once believes a thing's right, he'll go through fire and water—to the gates of Hell—to do it. Nothing—no one—can stop him."

"Can't see what you're driving at," whipped out Jane's hoarse voice. "Reasons for things? . . . Plenty of reason

for the thing in question: Mike's marrying Julie. I s'pose he loves her."

Toby kept steady eyes on Jane. "Perhaps. . . . They don't happen to be living together," he said bluntly.

"That does take some stiff reasoning," murmured Jane, no whit abashed.

"One obvious one, at least. Mike was quite frank about it when I blurted out something at the start. He doesn't love Julie. . . ."

"And you do," shot out Jane, before she thought.

Though the blood rushed up in his face, Toby looked steadily at Jane; but he made no answer.

"I see," said Jane, suddenly very gentle.

"Do you, I wonder?" said Toby, "all of it . . . ?"

"I can make a pretty fair guess, if you want me to," was the self-contained answer.

"Go on," said Toby. "Say what you want, Jane."

"Of course, part of it isn't a guess, old man," Jane began evenly. "I saw you come out of Julie's house, on a spring evening, five years ago. All who saw you then, Toby, might have read as they ran. For no fault of mine, I did read,—and I ran. Mutely, till this moment, Toby. . . ." The man on the fire bench remained unmoving as stone, staring before him. "Shall I go on?" asked Jane quietly. Toby simply nodded. . . .

"You went away—as far away as you could go . . . for just one reason, of course. I can't suppose Mike knew that reason, or what has happened would not have followed." Almost imperceptibly, Toby shook his head. Jane paused for a minute. The tall clock in the hall began to strike—five. Unconsciously she waited until the last

resonance died away. Then she lifted her head from the wing of the chair, and leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees.

"Go on, Jane," said Toby, for the second time. Jane was thinking fast. She began to speak. "Then, while you were off there for those five years, because nothing stands still—love, or time, or smoke—you either thought you had got over it, or knew you hadn't. And so came home . . . satisfied—or prepared to try again. . . ."

"I thought it was all over." The words burst from Toby, and he turned to look at Jane. The pain in his eyes was deep . . .

"I happened home—in the very midst of it," he went on fiercely, the pent-up feeling of two weeks rushing out now. . . . "I was left to eat the bridal feast with Julie, alone . . . while Mike went to a cow who was calving—" he was past any sense of humor— "That night, I knew—it was not over. . . . They're as happy as two kids—with nothing!" he said, with the unreasoning resentment of a child battering on a closed door. "God, what a mess!" he finished vehemently.

"It's damnably hard on you, old man," said Jane simply, "but why a mess—if they're happy?"

"For two reasons," Toby said impatiently: "sooner or later one of 'em will get hit . . . and it's hell for me."

"You'll have to let the first reason take care of itself. The last is in your hands to stop; why do you stay, Toby?"

"That's the hell—Mike needs me . . . Wants me, anyway. He asked me to stay and help him. I owe him such a damn lot," he finished miserably.

Jane reached out a hand and laid it on Toby's knee.

"You owe Mike—or any man," she said somberly, "a clear field with his own wife, Toby. If there is the shadow of a doubt that you can't keep your hands off—the best, the biggest thing you can do—whatever Mike might think—is to get out; cut and run, Toby, before anyone knows."

Without looking at Jane, Toby got off the bench, and walking to the window stood looking up into the woods that climbed the hill.

After a minute, he swung savagely about.

"I can't, Jane," he said hoarsely, roughly, "I can't. . . .!"

The front door opened. Josh Challoner was calling his wife. "You can, and you will, Toby," came the firm, quiet words, from Jane. Then: "I'm here, Josh, with Toby," she called out. "And I think he could use a drink."

A man laughed. "Right!" came the cheerful answer. Footsteps crossed the hall. A door shut, beyond.

The two in the room faced each other for a moment, without speaking.

"You're a brick, Jane!" said Toby at last. Then, more lightly: "What an afternoon I've wished on to you!"

A watery gleam lighted Jane's eyes. "I think it's frightened my cold off," she said. And there, being Jane, she left it.

3

Julie and Michael were going up the stairs together, followed by the faithful Tess, who saw to it that Julie was never out of sight if, by hook or crook, she could have it

otherwise. They went slowly, step for step, with Michael's arm through Julie's. It was one of the hardest things she had to school herself to, each day afresh, this offhand friendliness of Michael: to meet it naturally and frankly, halfway. It grew no easier; but Julie was nothing if not game. She fooled them all—playing the amusing and gay comrade, with, apparently, enormous enjoyment. Little, indeed, did Toby know of the struggle and sheer grit it took to achieve the effect given, of being “perfectly happy—ridiculously content—with nothing!”

It was nearly midnight,—an almost unheard-of hour for countryman Michael to be up; and, even now, Toby was still smoking a final pipeful of the strong tobacco he used, over the fire in the library.

Toby had started off with an absurd description of Jane and her red nose,—Jane held to the fire with a cold, struggling to read. From there they had naturally got on to the topic of books—and the virtue of American authors as against English and Irish. Toby had held out for the Americans—with some brilliance, no whit downed by the fact that he had Julie and Michael both against him. Knowing, even, that his brother's wife, as well as his brother, was no mean critic of the written word. Balance, cadence, plot, style, lift—strength, had all been run the gamut. . . .

“If it's strength you're after,” had been Toby's parting shot, delivered with a grin, as the two left him, “you do win. Why, some of those English fellars' books are so strong, it's a wonder they don't bubble into foam—and burst their covers. They can stew in their own juice, as far as I'm concerned. They're too damn strong.”

Michael had sent an answering grin from the doorway, where he stood arm in arm with Julie. "They're alive!" he had answered.

"So is a piece of old meat—or a bit of rancid cheese—But not with an element you cherish, particularly. —Go to bed, both of you—" Toby had advised with an amusing grimace of disgust.

"Good little boy," Julie's eyes had sparkled for a moment with an irresistible twinkle. "It's lovely to be pure—and stick to things of good report. . . . Drink your warm milk . . ." Her face had broken suddenly into a smile of deep friendliness, her voice had lost its tone of banter,—“Good-night, Toby.”

Toby's only reply had been to swing about on the fire bench and haul a pipe out of his pocket. . . .

Julie and Michael came to a halt at the top of the stairs. "Do you want Conrad now, Julie?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered with alacrity.

A gleam of enthusiasm lighted Michael's eyes. "Come along with me," he said, "I'll show you that old Staffordshire horse I told you about."

Without waiting for an answer, he caught Julie's arm and led her along the hall, past Toby's room across from the big room that had been his father's and mother's, to the room on the southeast corner, that looked up over the hill to the barns, and the woods beyond,—the room that had been his, always, since he was old enough to have one of his own.

At the door he dropped Julie's arm, and going in before her flashed on the light.

For the first time since she had been a child, with

curiously mixed feelings and a thickly beating heart, Julie stood on the threshold of Michael's room. . . . The light came from two old tin sconces, one at either end of the narrow shelf above the fireplace. The room was cold. One window was wide to the dark. . . . His back turned, Michael was making straight for the shelf above the fire. Julie drew in a sharp breath, and, with her heart pounding absurdly, went into her husband's room. . . . Michael had taken something from the shelf. He turned to face her.

"Here he is," he said, and held out his hand. Slowly Julie crossed the room and went to him. . . . On the palm of his hand stood a small cream-colored Staffordshire horse with a black mane. The base was a lovely apple-green.

"Oh!" she said with quick delight for the little figure, "he's perfect, Mike!"

"Yes, he is. Take him." Michael gave the little horse into Julie's keeping, and walked over to a jog in the wall, in the corner beyond the fireplace. "Which book did you want, Julie?" he asked. He had switched on another light, that hung in an old lantern. It shone on dim colors and the glint of gold on the backs of many books. The whole recess was lined with them . . . from the floor to the low ceiling.

"*Chance*," said Julie, and going slowly up to the shelf from which Michael had taken the little horse, put it carefully back, and, while Michael sought the book she had asked for, stood silently looking up at a splendid water-color: stark and daring, three great trees at the top of a sweep of snowy hill. One felt the wind that blew—and

the cold of it. It was there in the great tortured branches sharply cut against the clear, translucent green of the wintry sky . . . and the long, blue shadows stretching from the trees, athwart the snow of the hillside. . . . Julie was suddenly aware that Michael had come up and was standing beside her. "Sherry did that," he said.

Her eyes still raised to the picture, she knew that he was looking at her. . . . She stood thus for a further moment, not wanting to break the curious sense of oneness—of their being there in silence, side by side, in Michael's room. Then, because she dared wait no longer, she took her eyes from the picture and slowly turned to face him.

"I can't say what I think of it, Mike," she said. "It's too big—too beautiful and cruel and real, for me to try."

"Here's the book, Julie," he answered, without any further comment on the picture . . . and suddenly she knew she must go . . . right away, out of this room. It was too near to things that couldn't be. . . .

She smiled up into Michael's eyes and reached out her hand for the book he held.

"What a whirl of an evening we've had!" she said lightly. "It must be nearly morning." With the book in her hand, she left him there before the hearth, and walked over to the door.

At the threshold she turned to send back a whimsical look. "Good-night, Mike," she said; and with a slow smile, humorous, half teasing, "Don't catch your death, standing there in that open window."

"I like it," he said.

Her eyes still upon him, Julie gave a tiny shrug, that

seemed to say, with amusement, "Have your way. . . ." And turning from him she went out into the hall.

"Good-night," he called after her, half laughing. Then sobering suddenly, he swung about to look up at Sherry's picture. . . .

After a minute of somber reflection, he turned his back upon those three gaunt trees against a windswept sky . . . and, with an odd feeling of restlessness, new to him, his eyes roved about the room . . . coming to rest at last upon a clutch of boyish trophies hanging on the wall in the corner, above a squat, book-covered table,—two fox brushes carefully crossed beneath a fox's mask. . . . Suddenly, vividly, a long-ago run with his father's hounds came back to him. In his mind's eye, he saw, clearly, a small figure with a thatch of wind-blown, flaming hair, going straight, and without a qualm, for a huge stonewall. . . . Remembered exactly the twist and swerve of the lean, gray hunter she rode . . . and the fury of invective, in a clear voice, hurled after a vanishing horse,—"Damn your hide!". . . He had subsequently caught the wise old gray, and somehow hustled the pair—Julie once again up—over the wall. . . . He had followed suit; and, having then, to his way of thinking, done enough, had taken his own line. . . . Skinning through some woods, he had come out on the far side to find himself miraculously alone with hounds. . . . He gave a spontaneous laugh, now, as he stood looking at that moth-eaten old mask of a fox. . . .

"Little, spunky devil of a kid!" he said aloud, after a minute. He wished suddenly, surprisingly, that Julie hadn't gone off to bed in such a hurry. . . . He didn't

feel a bit like going to bed, himself. . . . It was cold, though: his eyes instinctively went to the open window, and now he smiled— What a great oaf of a barbarian he must seem to Julie, he thought ruefully . . . This cold room, bare of the things a woman seemed to bring with her—comfort and warmth. . . . The old library down there had it, somehow, already. He couldn't tell . . . just how— But it was different; and he liked it, that was all. Yes, he really did like it. Moved by an impulse he did not question, he went over and switched off the lights. Then crossing to the open window, he stood looking out into the winter night.

The waning moon hung low in the sky above the dark trees at the top of the hill. He could hear the swish of the wind, like the rush of surf far away, in the tall pines at the edge of the lane. Their long shadows lay across a patch of snow, and climbed halfway up the wall of the old kitchen ell— God, it was lovely! . . . Quiet and cold . . . with the moon sailing up there over the dark woods . . . He wished suddenly that Julie were seeing it, too. "Old sleepy-head!" he murmured, and smiled, remembering her face in the doorway. Then: "By Gad," he said in swift surprise, "I never let the dogs out . . .!"

Chapter Five

I

THE two brothers stood before the fire in the library. With head bent, and eyes intent on the work of his hands, Toby was filling his pipe. Michael, his shoulders pressed back against the mantelpiece, his hands thrust deep in the pockets of his corduroy breeches, let eyes of amused content rest on the girl in the big leather armchair before him. The lithe figure settled there gave the effect, as always when at rest, of extreme repose. That such a body, so filled with the fire of energy, so apparently untiring, could, at a moment's notice, so subside, was a never-ending wonder to Michael. Like Toby's, her head, too, was bent . . . that shapely, burnished head. . . . Her eyes rested dreamily upon the steadily clicking knitting needles in her hands. On the low table at her elbow, some springing up, others curled over, a mass of pale yellow tulips, in the copper jar Julie loved, sent forth, on the resinous warmth from the fire, the cool fragrance of

spring. Once she turned and sniffed with slow delight the nearest tulip. For a moment longer, Michael watched her with amused reflection; then: "Who gets the cherry-colored jerkin, Julie?" he asked.

With a quick tilt of her head, Julie looked up to meet the humorous questioning eyes bent upon her. "Marty," she said; and with a smile creeping over her face, "Do you covet it, Mike?" Michael laughed happily, and made no other answer.

Toby had finished the business of filling his pipe. "Well, Mike," he said slowly, without raising his eyes, "shall we be off?"

"No," was the surprising answer—whimsical but definite. Michael was looking at Julie. "It's Monday afternoon . . . there's ice-cutting, wood-hauling, more dressing to go on—but I'm goin' to turn my back on 'em all and foot it off over the hills— Will you come, Julie?"

Michael saw an impish sparkle dance for a moment in a pair of green eyes. "You crazy man . . . I might—" Julie said mischievously.

Toby gave a grunt, made his way among the dogs drowsing on the floor, then turned to look at the two.

"It's damn cold," he remarked. "Better not poke your noses over too many hilltops . . . or you'll come back without 'em."

They stood on the side of a hill, sheltered from the cold wind by a sprawling cedar tree. The river, a width of black ice, cut about at the foot of the hill to disappear under the shallow arch of an old bridge. Beyond the river, the bare brown winter fields crept up to a group

of yellow farm buildings, passed it on either side, and climbed to meet a ridge of dark woods on another hill.

In the forced constriction of the shelter, standing there in the cold of the winter afternoon, Julie's arm was pressed for a moment against Michael's. Unconscious of the cold, knowing only a moment of exquisite happiness, she neither moved nor spoke.

Julie had never seen before just the Michael of this past hour. That subtle reserve, that, seeming to give all, gave in reality so little of his inmost self, had for once dropped away. For that short hour since they had left the road and plunged into the woods below the Challoners', she had felt strangely, miraculously near to seeing the real Michael. . . . Now, while she stood thus beside him, she felt, suddenly, with a thrust of fearful joy, that she must not, could not, stir or speak; but that dared she raise her eyes to look upon his face, she would see there, naked and unashamed—the real man. . . .

Michael abruptly broke the silence: "Look!" he whispered. One arm was about her shoulders. His strong fingers grasped her arm.

"What?" She gave a little breathless laugh. "Where, Mike?"

"A fox—down there by the edge of the river—" He swung her swiftly toward him, his free arm pointing down the hill. . . . For a bewildering moment she seemed to be enveloped by the cold, fresh tang of tweed and tobacco . . . and clean, out-of-door man.

"Do you see him?" Michael urged assent, as eagerly as a boy.

Julie did. But little, sporting Tess saved her words for her. A small black body, with wildly flapping ears, was streaking aslant the hill. Frantic and continuous as the whistle of a train, her "view halloo" streamed out behind.

Michael gave a short laugh of incredulous delight. His arm slid quickly from Julie's shoulder. . . . "Come on," he said, "we're alone with hounds. . . ." Julie caught the brief flash of laughing eyes above, then, with an answering laugh, fled down through the cold air in the wake of a long-legged man and a small black dog in full cry.

The fox, like a ruddy shadow, melted into a patch of junipers, and was seen no more. Tess followed, mute now for lack of breath. . . . They could hear snufflings and scratching going on somewhere inside. Michael turned a radiant face to Julie. "A sharp burst!" he got out, and exploded with laughter.

Before Julie could make any answer to this sally, there came the brittle sound of shattered ice from beyond the covert of juniper.

"My God!" said Michael, "the little lady's in. . . ." He plunged through the low bushes, Julie after him.

"She couldn't have got into the river," offered Julie with some confidence.

"There are funny holes here that don't freeze much." Michael jerked the words over his shoulder as he ploughed on through the prickly stuff. The sharp tang of crushed juniper rose about them . . . and then Julie saw Michael crouch suddenly over.

Julie was beside him. "Wait a minute, Tess," he was

soothing the piteous struggles of a frantic puppy wallowing in broken ice and dark icy water. "She's caught by the leg, on the other side of the hole," he said. "I've got her so she won't go under. Can you slip round and see what's holding her. . . . ?"

"Poor little girl," whispered Julie. She was bending over feeling about in the ice-filled water. She pulled gently on a submerged root, and the freed body of the cocker bobbed high. Michael hauled her out. . . . He was holding her, all wet and dripping, against his chest . . . not such a valiant foxhound, now . . . only a shivering, whimpering cocker puppy. "Hunting's the devil, old lady, isn't it?" Julie heard him comforting in the gentle way he had with animals. Then abruptly: "What the devil can we rub her with, Julie? She might get pneumonia out of this nonsense."

He looked up to see Julie standing slimly before him in a neat pair of gray whipcord breeches. Something woolly and black was across her outstretched arms.

"Give her to me, Mike," she said.

Unquestioning, Michael did as he was bid, taking, as was his habit, the necessary things for granted, wasting no time in foolish fussing. . . .

Because he saw she wanted it so, he stood over Julie without a word, while she rubbed the puppy thoroughly with her makeshift towel.

"Now," he said, when it was done, "give me your skirt, and run like hell—the two of you—for the old house down there by the bridge. Johnny Dick's old Nora'll catch you on the fly."

She caught all three of them.

2

Julie woke suddenly from a vivid dream: cold with horror, she had stood alone on a windy shore, watching Michael fight his way through broken, floating ice, across a wide stretch of dark water. . . . With a gasp of relief, she realized that it was only a dream. Then swiftly, on the heels of the realization, flashed the thought of Tess—the cause of it.

In spite of the hard rubbing, there beside the crushed juniper bushes—in spite of the sharp run to Johnny Dick's house, the warmth of the fire, and hot milk slashed with plenteous brandy, the puppy had shivered and moped, depressingly, through the evening.

With hands well practiced, and sure, Michael had rubbed her chest and throat and hot little black nose with camphor liniment, and given her a (loathsome, to Tess) dose out of a bottle in the battered medicine chest that stood in the corner of his den. Julie had warmed some milk, which the little dog adamantly refused to look at, and finally, in a nest of warmed blankets before the fire in Michael's den, well protected from possible sparks by the old nursery screen from Naomi's, they had left her, and shut the door.

Julie lay for a moment, without stirring, in Naomi's old four-poster bed. The night was very cold. She could see a patch of starry sky cut across by a dark branch of hemlock. . . . Would the fire have gone out, in the den? She reached forth and switched on the lamp on the table beside her. Then throwing off the warm clothes, she slid

out of bed. . . . Thrusting her feet into furlined slippers, she caught up a soft white wrapper of eider-down and got quickly into it.

Halfway across the room she turned back to shut the window and pull the clothes up on the bed. In doing so she caught sight of herself in the mirror over the dressing table. Her face looked small and pale in its cloud of unbound tawny hair . . . Like a child, she thought. The next minute she had quietly shut the door behind her and was making her way noiselessly along the passage and down the stairs, past the gaping door of the library. Turning the corner beyond the dining room, she saw a fine line of light showing in the darkness, beneath the door of Michael's den. A good fire, after all, she thought, reassured, and softly opened the door. . . .

There *was* a good fire. There was also a light, on the table by the hearth. In an old plum-colored dressing gown, casting a gigantic shadow on the wall, Michael kneeled with his back to Julie, before a nest of blankets near the fire.

"Oh!" breathed Julie involuntarily, and for a moment just stood there mutely, on the threshold, holding her wrapper closely about her.

At the low exclamation, Michael twisted about on his knees. For a slow minute he stared, in wonder, at the naïve apparition in white standing there in the dimness of the doorway. . . . She was so beautifully made. From her small head, with its ruffled ruddy hair, to her bare, slender ankles . . . so fine and delicate and comely. . . .

"How is she, Michael?" The delicious throaty voice seemed to sing in his ears—stirring swiftly to life something

that, until now, had been slumbering. He dragged his eyes from the small questioning face, and bent his head abruptly over the puppy at his knees.

"The little lady's had a chill, of sorts," he said;—"I was just going to heat some milk and get a drop of brandy for her."

"I'll do it," was the brief answer, and turning, Julie was swallowed in the darkness of the hall.

Michael, still on his knees, stared at the empty doorway, and was conscious of the faint, cool fragrance of white violets, on a sunny bank, in April. . . . "I love her . . ." he said slowly, incredulously. Suddenly, with curious vividness, Naomi's words flowed back to him—"You were always *sans peur* . . . but—*sans reproche*, too?" . . . God! . . . What an inconceivable position he had innocently—stupidly—blundered into! . . . He loved his wife. He could not tell her that he loved her . . . or possess her. . . . She cared nothing for him.

With sublime and abysmal confidence, he had thus bound himself. . . .

In the old kitchen, with hands that trembled, Julie did what must be done, while in her mind throbbed the intimate thought of Michael in the rich darkness of that old plum-colored dressing gown—his hair tousled, kneeling there. . . . His surprise, followed by that curiously somber look, as he stared at her standing in the dimness of the doorway. . . . In a moment, inexplicably, the carefree happiness and almost nearness to Michael, of the afternoon, was shattered and gone. . . . Her heart was beating wildly, in a secret, frightening, breathless way, that seemed

to shake her whole body. . . . She wanted him . . . her husband— Ah, God, with what fierceness . . . to give—and to take— Yes, she was just a primitive woman, facing a naked truth . . . old as time. . . .

As she stood there, her hands, as is the way at such times, doing unbidden, without conscious thought, the little simple duties to be done, there came a sleepy twitter and chirp from the covered canary cage above the pots of geraniums in the window.

That faint twitter of a sleeping bird awaked was curiously dynamic in its effect upon Julie. She whirled about, for the moment unstrung, oversensitive. "Don't I know it!" she said passionately. . . . "I'm a fool—a fool!" she got out between shut teeth; and swiftly: "You can't quit now, Julie Byrd." A sob of sorry laughter escaped her. Then, on the heels of it, a strange calm began to fill her being. Coldly and impersonally she dealt with herself, and with devastating scorn: "You fool!" she whispered— "you've got to do it—somehow. . . ."

The milk was heated. She found the brandy, and slowly, as one who has survived a soul-shattering experience, and finds some inner strength to support her and to cover it over, she went back to Michael and the sick puppy.

Gentle, seemingly remote in her loveliness, she helped Michael with the business of feeding the little dog. A sense of unreality held her in cool, strong hands . . . aloof. . . . She heard herself, as someone apart, laughing softly as she knelt beside her husband and stroked the silky head of Tess. . . . "She's better, Mike," said that other voice . . . even as the tears sprang up, swift and stinging, behind her eyes . . . and she saw, in a flash of supreme

clarity, the path that lay before her,—to the full, the torture.

Only a few words were spoken, and those, intimately off-hand, pertaining to the business of the moment. . . . Michael felt the very unself-conscious ease of her to be a barrier . . . holding him off . . . pushing him far away from all that might be . . . and from that great distance, where he stood alone, making her, in his eyes, immeasurably desirable. . . .

Together, they left Tess at last, and went through the old night-quiet house, up the dim stairs. . . . “Damn decent of you,” Michael told her, at the parting of their ways . . . “Good-night, Julie. . . .” “Almost good morning, Mike,” she said, and left him.

How could Julie know, as she lay with wide eyes, watching the cold coming of the dawn, that a third player had joined the game being played under Windyhill’s old sheltering roof,—a player in deadly earnest, for all that at his entering the game the need for playing had actually ceased?

3

When Julie came down to breakfast, as fresh and trim and sleek of head as though she had slept the night through, only Toby was there. Standing before the fire in the hall, with a bantering light in his eyes, he greeted her on the stairs, as, in those inimitable tales, *Further Experiences of an Irish R. M.*, that famous old lady, Mrs. Knox, one morning greeted the R. M. himself.

“‘Good morrow, old Sir Thomas Erpingham’.”

With a curious and surprising relief that only Toby was there, Julie rose spontaneously to meet, halfway, the jesting words.

"... 'A good soft pillow' for my good red head—" she caught him up, misquoting over-gravely, and saw the ready laughter leap into Toby's eyes. Swift answering mirth brimmed up in hers. She came decorously on down the stairs.

"Mike's gone off," Toby announced, as she reached the hall.

"Gone off?" questioned Julie, arrested.

Toby nodded. "Some early worms to be caught."

"Without his breakfast?"

Toby shrugged. "Can't tell you that. He poked his head in at my door, at cock-crow, and said to tell you he had to go—somewhere. I was too sleepy to hear..."

Julie looked at him for a moment, without apparently seeing him, Toby thought. Then: "Don't wait for me, Tobe," she said, "I'm going to see how Tess is."

"She's better," he called after her, and made his way leisurely to the dining room.

Tess *was* better. She wriggled up from her nest of red blankets to greet Julie.

"You brave little old hound," said the latter, taking the puppy up in gentle arms. "You mustn't go falling into any more puddles."

After a minute, she put the little cocker back on the blankets . . . "Mike's had you—somewhere, I guess," she observed, looking about with a flicker of amusement. . . . "I wonder if he fed you, too." With her nose tucked

into a fold of blanket, Tess looked up with dark expectant eyes.

During breakfast Toby was extremely amusing. Oddly enough, Julie found that she was ravenous, and, to old Sam's delight, held her own, even with Toby as lead. Apparently with nothing upon their minds, carefree as children, they tucked away, between them, an absurd amount of scrambled eggs, with accompanying strips of crisp bacon . . . toast—more toast, and honey, half a pot-ful.

"Well," said Julie, with a comical lift of her eyes in Toby's direction, as she poured for him his third cup of coffee, "I hope you'll keep till lunch time."

"Ditto," shot out Toby, and they both laughed.

"I'm going to see Jane," announced Julie as they lighted cigarettes.

"For God's sake, take her a book," chuckled Toby. "She was foaming at the mouth over the lot she found herself with— She never reads unless she's sick abed, and that only happens in a dog's age. . . . Josh never opens a book. . . . She was wrastling with 'Pilgrim's Progress' when I left her. Said she thought it was most amusin'."

"I can just hear her!" laughed Julie.

In the hall, sitting with Fanny on the settle, she watched Toby get into warm things.

"Any message for Mike?" he asked, as he tweaked a green muffler about his neck and stuffed it into the front of an old leather coat.

Julie appeared to consider. "Mm—no. . . . I wonder if he fed Tess," she murmured. Her eyes had gone to the

window. She was looking up over the rust-brown slope of hillside, and seemed for a moment to have forgotten the presence of the man by the door.

"I'll ask him," said Toby abruptly.

Julie's eyes came swiftly back. She bit off some retort, and then laughed instead.

"You don't know where he is—" she reminded him, and jumping to her feet, went off, followed by Fanny, to the kitchen.

"I'll be damned!" swore Toby softly, a thwarted look in the eyes that followed her.

Then suddenly he swung about and opened the door.

4

Looking down the luncheon table to Michael, Julie found his eyes upon her, in a look of deep abstraction. He did not take them away as hers met them, but focussing swiftly, asked, as though bringing back his thoughts from a distance: "You didn't get fagged out with your night of sick-nursing, did you Julie?"

"Who's sick?" inquired Toby, lifting his head from a close inspection of an old pipe he was filling from a striped tobacco pouch.

"Tess was," Julie told him with a half smile. Then, her glance returning to Michael: "She's much better, isn't she?"

"Yes," said the latter slowly, absently.

Toby turned once more to Julie. "Were you sitting in Mike's old den there, holding Tess's paw through the wee

hours?" he asked absurdly. But he seemed to want an answer.

"Not through many of them, Tobe," she answered, amused, and then proceeded calmly: "I woke up because I had a nightmare," she gave a droll shiver of recollection. "It was horribly cold, and I wondered if the fire had gone out down in the den, where we had left Tess. . . . I came to see. . . . It hadn't, for the very good reason that Mike had got there before me, and done something about it. . . . He was there, in a lovely plum-colored wrapper, kneeling, like a knight of old, keeping vigil. For a little while we all three hobnobbed over a bowl of warm milk and brandy," she confided with extreme and childlike naïvety, looking serenely at Toby. The slow color crept up in Michael's weather-beaten face, and no one saw it come,—or go. But Julie, the while, holding onto the triviality of the moment, felt a shaft of surprise, that such a blind should be so easy. . . .

"How was Jane?" asked Michael at last.

Julie's eyes filled with swift and smiling reminiscence. "Jane, with a cold—" she shook her head—"poor Jane. She's not used to sitting by the embers. Being forced to, I mean." Then sobering suddenly, she broke off to ask: "How did you know I was there?"

"Saw you." Michael was slowly pushing back his chair . . . smiling down the table at Julie.

"Running pretty mute, Mike," she suggested. She did not ask where, though, and Michael did not offer to tell. . . . "May I be excused, Mrs. Cochrane?" he asked lightly. "I've got to run *now*, anyway. . . . Coming, Tobias?"

"I don't—think—I will. . . . There's wood to be hauled . . . ice to be cut . . . dressing—" he cocked a speculative eye at Julie—"I think I'll just turn my back on 'em all—and—" slower, more faint of voice, the mimicking proceeded—"hop—over—the roof-tops. . . . Want to come along, Julie?"

Without mirth, Michael was watching not Toby but Julie.

For a moment, with ruddy head atilt, dancing devils in her eyes, Julie considered Toby. "Mm—I might—" she said; and added in a laughing rush, "if Micky weren't in bed with a cold—waiting for a snatch of 'David Copperfield'."

"You wretch!" said Toby.

Michael, standing behind his chair, comfortably big in his loose tweed things, caught Julie's attention.

"Will you be back to tea?" he asked.

Julie turned to him eyes in which still lingered the smile from their encounter with Toby. Slowly, as their glances met, the smile died. Silently she nodded assent. Michael stood for a moment longer looking down upon her upturned face. Then he swung about abruptly and left her. . . .

With a sharp sense of bewilderment, Julie got to her feet . . . What had happened to Michael?

Toby was making after him for the door.

"Give my best to old Naomi," he said over his shoulder. . . .

But Julie, with her back to him, looking down over the bleak winter fields to the river, appeared not to have heard.

5

When Michael and Toby got back at tea time, after an arduous two hours in the woods, they found the tea kettle carrying on a companionable little purr of conversation, to the crackle and hiss of the fire . . . solely for the benefit of a recovering Tess and the lemon-and-white setter. Julie was not there. Fanny, bounding into the room, jumped into a chair, and sitting bolt upright, with cocked head and twitching nose, surveyed the intriguing tea tray.

For a moment of absurdly acute disappointment, Michael paused on the threshold, regarding the lonely tea table. Then, with a half-hearted laugh, he walked over and hauled Fanny out of the chair, to drop into it himself. Toby was already attending to a hot buttered scone. "Wonder where your wife is," he threw out casually. "Is it all right to proceed?"

Michael nodded, in answer to the last remark, and leaning over hauled Tess up on to his knees. "Better, old girl?" he asked, looking at the puppy's eyes and nose. "Seem to be all right, you rascal."

"Well—" drawled Toby, "aren't you goin' to eat anything?"

Before Michael could answer, the telephone rang from the desk. Toby whipped about and made for it. Leaning back in the deep chair, with Tess held against his chest, Michael swung a crossed leg and covertly watched Toby as he took off the receiver. He knew who it was going to be.

"Hello!" said Toby's crisp voice. Michael saw a smile flash over his face. "Oh, Julie. . . . Yeah. . . . Wait a sec. He's right here. Want to speak to him? . . . Well, all right, what is it? —Over there? I'll ask him." Toby turned a face lighted with amusement to Michael. "Julie says they're hanging on to her for tea, and want us, too." Then, without waiting for an answer, he was talking again. He laughed. "O. K.! We'll be down in a minute." He hung up the receiver.

"Come on, old thing—stir your stumps," he said, coming over to where Michael still sat with the puppy in his arms.

Michael only looked lazily up at him and slowly swung a long leg. "Think I'll stay here and cope with some of these scones," he observed. "I'm frightfully comfortable. You skip down and bring the lady home."

"You lazy dog!" said Toby good-naturedly. "What will the lady think?"

Michael appeared to consider. "We'll ask her later, perhaps," he suggested with a slow smile. . . . "Go on, Tobe. I'm staying with Tess."

"Stupid!" said Toby with a laugh, and strolled off whistling "Home, Sweet Home" between his teeth. A minute later, Michael heard the front door bang, and then saw Toby's figure pass by the window, against the sunset light on the hillside.

"*Are* we stupid, I wonder, Tess?" he said to the puppy. Depositing her upon the rug, he poured himself a cup of tea and absently ate two scones. Then pulling his pipe out of a deep pocket he filled it slowly and lighted it.

Lying back in the old green armchair—Julie's chair now—he watched the light die out in the sky over the hill, while the dusk crept into the firelit room. Fanny, her chin on his foot, snored gently as she slept. His pipe went out, unsmoked. For minutes he did not move. The firelight played over the strong, rugged lines of his face and flickered on his long figure sunk deep in the old chair. A log broke and an end rolled on to the hearth. A dog retreated, circled, and came back, while a thin line of smoke from the broken log on the hearth curled up into the room. Unheeding, Michael stared out over the darkening line of woods against a paling sky.

The sudden sharp burr of the telephone shattered the silence of the room. Michael stirred and came back to earth. He gave a long sigh and got to his feet, much to the annoyance of the sleeping Fanny.

It was Naomi. "Mike?"—the cheerful voice shook Michael together. "You were a lazy old curmudgeon not to come to tea. But you've *got* to come to dinner. . . . There are four duck a-hangin' in the larder. The time has come—"

. . . "'To talk of many things?'" cut in Michael, knowing he would have to go, or seem peculiar . . .

His words were drowned in a throaty chuckle from Naomi.

"Right," he said, and hung up the receiver.

For a minute, as the firelight caught his eyes there came into them the old fighting gleam that Johnny Dick would have recognized. He had seen it in France. "Right" he said again. And then with a sudden sparkle of humor, "My God, Fanny, you're in the fire. I smell

burning fur." He strode over and got the log back where it belonged; then opened a window . . .

"Whew, dogs! Why didn't you say something?" he asked whimsically. "Come on, the lot of you, to your supper."

6

The door shut behind them on a parting shot from the irresponsible Dick. Michael and Julie and Toby stood three abreast under the cold stars, on the smooth slab of stone that served as doorstep for the Sheridans.

"Amusing fellar, Johnny!" observed Michael, his eyes following up the faint wide pathway of the Milky Way.

"Not as amusing as you were to-night, Mike," his wife took him up surprisingly. And thrusting an arm through one of each of the brothers', "Let's move on before we freeze," she suggested with deceiving lightness.

The turf of the hillside was hard as iron beneath their feet. The night was still and very cold. From below them came a long, hollow boom as a crack ran out into the ice on the river, the sound reverberating with a ringing twang among the trees on the farther shore.

"Lord, those ducks were good!" said Toby with appreciation.

"Old greedy-gut!" laughed Julie.

"Wonder if Johnny's as dead broke as he makes out?" continued Toby imperturbably.

"Yes, he's broke," came from Michael: "poor old Johnny . . . he just can't keep out of the market." Toby gave a grunt, in answer, and then for a moment they

climbed in silence. Two shadowy dogs raced past and went sliding up before them.

"Blast it!" said Toby suddenly, drawing his arm away from Julie's— "Got something sharp in my shoe. . . . Go on, I've got to get it out 'fore I go lame." He dropped on to one knee and began without further ado to untie his shoe.

When Julie looked back in a minute to see if he followed, Toby was on his feet again, but turned from them, facing the dark loop of frozen river . . . with no apparent intention of catching them up. She became suddenly conscious that she was walking alone, arm in arm, with Michael. Starting to withdraw her arm she felt it held tightly for one short second. Then, with some casual remark about a cow he meant to buy on the morrow, Michael had dropped it, and without a glance in her direction was going right on with more farm news. . . .

He was saying anything—snatching at the first thing that came to hand. There beat within him, terrifying in its strength, the desire to crush the lovely slim body of this girl beside him . . . close . . . To gather her up and run with her over the starlit hill—away from Toby—from everyone. . . . Instead, he must follow what lead she gave him,—walk soberly, arm in arm—or not, as the case might be—through life. Talking of casual workaday things—cows, politics—Johnny Dick and his lost "pile",—anything in the world but the one thing that mattered. . . .

". . . Do you think I can?" —What had Julie asked? With swift contrition he turned to her. "I know you can," he told her drolly.

Julie gave a quick catch of laughter,—“You haven't the

vaguest idea what I'm talking about, Mike— Now, have you?"

"No," he confessed, and was immediately caught up in a burst of Julie's infectious laughter.

On the hillside below, Toby swung about at the sound. "What a pair!" He addressed the stars. "My God, what a pair! How can one tell—anything!"

With a shrug of his shoulders, he walked on slowly up the hill.

7

"God, how lucky I am!" Ambrose Sheridan smiled into the reflection of his wife's gray eyes in the mirror.

Reaching up, Naomi took the hand resting on her shoulder, and, pulling it across her breast, turned her enchanting face to look up at her husband.

"Kiss me, Sherry," she said.

Straightening up again, the big man looked quizzically down at his wife.

Slowly Naomi nodded, a smile coming into her eyes.

"I know what you're going to say, Sherry: Where is it going to end up, for those two—?"

"I was going to say those three," he answered gravely, not in the least surprised by his wife's perspicacity.

"What *do* you mean, darling? Sit here, where I can see you." Naomi pulled him down on to the arm of her chair.

"You can't leave old Toby out of the picture," said Ambrose Sheridan quietly.

"*Toby?*" came the incredulous whisper.

"He loves Julie," was the simple answer.

"I believe—you're right—" the words dropped one by one from Naomi's lips. "Oh, Sherry— How ghastly!"

"What *is* old Mike up to, Naomi? A girl like Julie—fascinating—full of—oh, you know what I mean."

"Allure?" suggested Naomi wickedly.

"I suppose that's it." Sherry grinned, then sobered,—
"To stick her off in your old room," he went on, gathering force as he went. "What's going on under that flame of hair—behind those long green eyes of Julie's? Do you know, at all, Naomi?"

Slowly she shook her head. "No, Sherry dear—I can't remotely guess."

"Well—something is, and don't you forget it," he told her vehemently. "It wouldn't be too out of line if she loved old Mike. He's not without attraction himself—inscrutable devil!"

"Mike's as square as the Lord Himself!" defended his sister with some spirit.

"Never said he wasn't, old girl— Hold your horses a minute. I'm just inferring he's a bit stupid, that's all. . . . He doesn't know the first thing about women."

"And you do?" put in Naomi drolly . . .

A slow smile crept up into Ambrose Sheridan's eyes. "I know one of 'em pretty well," he said.

"What can we do about it? That's the question, Sherry."

"Damn well keep our hands off everyone but Toby."

"And that's going to be *my* job? —Well, I won't stick at it, darling, if that's what it comes to . . ."

In the room next to them someone burst into a muffled fit of coughing.

"Sit tight, I'll dose him." Ambrose got up from the arm of the chair. "Hang on, Micky!" he called, "I'm coming."

"You blessed old thing," said Naomi; "the paregoric's in the bathroom."

She watched the tall figure in a dark silk wrapper disappear into the bathroom, then turning away she stared for a moment with unseeing eyes at her reflection in the mirror—

"He was born under an unlucky star, poor boy," she said at last, and then, unaccountably: "Poor Julie!" And quite a time later, with a sorry little smile: "Poor old Sir Galahad!"

Chapter Six

I

FOR a week the frost held, the temperature hovering around zero, until the fields were like iron and the ice on the river crackled, with long snap and running boom, through the night, as the moon waned to a white feather that rose in the ice-cold dawn, above the dark trees on the hill.

At breakfast that morning Toby had laughingly asked Julie if she would ride with them to an outlying wood beyond the river. Michael had shot a look at him and answered crisply, "My God, Toby,—it's two below!" And Julie had bitten off words of spontaneous acquiescence, bending quickly to hide her bewilderment in caressing fond Tess who was crouched against her leg. Toby had made no further suggestion. . . .

She had watched the two brothers go off muffled to the eyebrows, and now, in a mood of strange desolation, stood at the window up in her room, with unseeing eyes,

staring into the depths of the big hemlock, while her thoughts roved miserably, and in deep bewilderment, over the past week. . . . Michael had not for a moment overlooked or neglected the smallest thing for her comfort; but it seemed to Julie that the thing he had once so freely given—amusing and frank companionship—he now withheld. As though, she thought with a sorry laugh, he were looking after a little child; scrupulously carefully—utterly impersonal. Only now and then, as a survival of those first days, would come some flash of humor. She fancied sometimes that he was glad Toby was there . . . that he need not be alone with her. She had never thought of Michael as seeking after his kind or being particularly dependent upon his fellows. Now he grasped, with curious alacrity, the chance to go to the Sheridans'—the Challoners'—to have Johnny Dick come there—any diversion.

Could it be because of her . . . that having a woman about, even in such an offhand and free capacity, palled?—had become, so soon, a nuisance? Remembering, then, countless things which Michael did for her—thought for her, each day—in further bewilderment, she put this doubt away, as futile. Then what was it? What made him suddenly seem so detached, as though his thoughts were miles away?

Julie turned abruptly from the window, where her thoughts had become woven into the branches of the big hemlock tree, and her eyes were caught by patient Tess, lying like a small mat at her feet, gazing expectantly up.

“Well, old lady—” she burst out in a flash of fighting

spirit, "God knows it's a hard one—but we'll follow his lead!" And forthwith, getting into the warmest things she could find, she plumped an unwilling Tess (the puppy still had a running nose) into her wing chair, pulled it round in front of the fire, shut the door and ran down the stairs.

It certainly was cold. Julie drew in the clear sharp air with delight, and with a half amused, half sorry laugh at the thought of Michael's vehement: "My God, Toby—it's two below!"

A great gabble of garrulous cawing was going on in the pine trees at the curve of the lane. It hushed for a moment, and then, with one raucous, long-drawn caw, three ragged crows flapped forth and took their inconsequent flight over the hill to the far woods. Julie followed in their direction.

It really was frightfully cold. Walking was one thing; riding would have been quite another. Michael had been right, she conceded with curious warmth of gratitude, as she walked quickly on up the hill, her heavy hobnailed shoes making a little hollow thumping sound on the frozen ground. She climbed over the wall into the road at the top of the hill, catching her skirt, as she went, on a sharp twig of wild cherry. Stooping to free it, she let out a good round "Damn!" for the hole left in the black tweed. And straightening up found herself face to face with Jane. —Jane, on foot!

"Damn what?" Jane's laugh seemed to snap and crackle in the extreme cold.

"Damn *you*—for laughing," chuckled Julie, her spirits rising at the sight of the woman before her. "I tore my

skirt," she explained. And then, "Are all your horses dead?"

"You might well ask," replied Jane blandly. "The vet said a short walk to-day, if it were warmer. . . . I'm keeping to my part—even if the weatherman neglected his."

"Jane—you're an idiot!" wailed Julie. "You ought to be shot, coming out on a day like this!"

"I'd have turned into an idiot, and shot myself, if I'd stayed cooped up in the house another minute."

"Well," laughed Julie, "let's move on . . . somewhere. I can't feel my feet. Where were you off to?"

"Oh—just hoping for diversion." Jane gave a droll grimace. "Let's go to the stables, and see the brothers Cochrane. . . . I liked that book you brought me," she added inconsequently. "Forgotten the name; but the old boy knew the country, all right."

"He was supposed to." Julie grinned delightedly. "'Old boy'!—dear Thomas Hardy. You'll be the death of me, Jane, over books."

They were walking now along the frozen ruts in the road, on their way to the farm barn. "Don't hurry me, Julie," said Jane; "It gets into my pipes and makes me wheeze, damn it!" Then, with an abrupt leap from the subject at hand: "Where *are* Mike and Toby?"

Julie indicated, with a vague gesture, the far line of woods across the river. "Somewhere off there." She gave a rueful smile and looked at Jane. "Left me supposedly hugging the fire. Toby suggested I should go a-riding with them, and Mike said—'God, no'—or 'My God,' or something vehement, and told Toby it was two below. . . ."

Jane gave her husky, catching chuckle. "And so—" she took up the story—another follower of Somerville and Ross—"you came out alone—to soak the cold', like old Mrs. Knox."

Julie nodded, her eyes filling with quiet mirth. "Without even Mullins to ram a bonnet onto me," she concluded.

Jane shrugged a pair of tweed-clad shoulders. "Aren't men idiots, the dears?" she asked, hugely tolerant, of the world at large. "Let 'em think they're looking after *you*, when really, all the time, you're looking after *them*! That's my motto. They're just like children, Julie—the best of 'em. But you can't let 'em see you think so," she ended sagely.

"I rather think you're right, Jane," agreed Julie with a slow smile.

"I've got Toby's pipe in my pocket this minute." Here Jane shook her head disparagingly . . . "Julie—the pipes I've salvaged, in my day—and from the most inconceivable places, my dear—would fill a hogshead. . . . And when you bring the things back to 'em they are invariably fallen upon like a long-lost brother. . . . But have they ever been looked for, in the meantime? Never!

"What do they do when they live alone, losing collar buttons, and specs, and pipes . . . living in a clutter the neatest of 'em never seem to mind, or even notice?—God knows!" she finished with mild benevolence—"I don't." And she burst suddenly into a fit of coughing. . . .

"You really are a goose, Jane, to be out to-day," Julie told her.

"Well—aren't we going in, this very second?"

"A barn's no place, either," put in Julie, with reason.

"A barn's the best place—under a roof—on God's earth," croaked Jane . . . "And there's that long-legged husband of yours this minute, crossing the yard with a pack o' dogs at his heels."

Michael saw them coming, and diverging from his original purpose, whatever it might have been, swerved for the gate of the yard and met them at the edge of the farm lane.

"Mornin', Mike," got in Jane first, "I've just been soundly trounced for pokin' my nose into the open. . . . I seek shelter, my lord," she went on, "beneath yon branching roof-tree . . . there to rest my fragile frame in the homely warmth from hay and fragrant-breathing kine. . . ."

"You're hopeless, Jane!" laughed Michael.

He turned back with them, walking toward the barn beside Julie. "So you lit out into the cold, after all," he said, looking down, half amused, at the fur-capped head, with the chin buried in a soft black muffler. Julie nodded; but it was Jane who answered briskly for her.

"Don't you know Julie well enough, Mike, not to expect mere weather to hold her under a roof? —Was it very bad, a-horse, this morning?"

Michael, apparently not heeding Jane at all, was looking at his wife, his usual sense of humor flown to the winds.

"Did you want to ride with us?" he asked soberly. . . . "Why didn't you say you liked zero weather, Julie?"

A sudden smile flashed over the girl's thin face, at the gravity of his. "I thought you knew," she answered demurely . . . "and it's lovely to be looked after, Mike."

Lord, how fascinating she was! thought Michael, forgetting to answer . . . naughty, like that. . . .

"Aren't you going to open your door to your lady guests?" twitted Jane, standing in a mock-forlorn attitude of waiting before the big barn door.

In a moment of extreme annoyance—at the whole world, and all the people in it—Michael brushed past Jane, slid open the door and pushed it to again behind them.

"Heavens, how good it smells!" murmured Jane, sniffing happily the warm scent of hay and horses. She drifted off down the wide runway between the box stalls and the huge supporting beams of the hayloft.

Julie looked up at Michael and in swift understanding smiled straight into his eyes. In the surprising intimacy of that look, quick as thought, Michael spoke.

"You're a brick, Jude," he said, unconsciously using her childhood nickname.

"Show me the bull calf, Mike," was the unexpected answer. Julie was suddenly afraid—for herself.

Michael had the blank feeling that for some reason a door had been quietly shut in his face. "Yes," he said crisply, unreasonably hurt—for what? And abruptly, without looking at Julie, he started off down the length of the barn.

With the miserable sensation that to save herself she had been ridiculously curt to Michael, Julie walked slowly after him along the rows of boxes, past the ladder going up to the hayloft, to the pen where the little bull calf lived.

Jane was already there, her shoulders hunched, leaning on the top of the door.

"I'd like to spend the day in here with this nice woolly thing," she observed, lifting amused eyes to Michael.

"Go to it, Jane!" He turned lazily, with easy good-humor, to his wife. "What do *you* say, Julie?"

"Perfect!" she agreed . . . and felt how hopelessly little she really knew the man whom the world called her husband.

2

Beyond the firelight the room melted into shadowy dusk. Once, as a flame licked upward, a ruddy light flickered for a moment on the backs of books, picking out gleams of gold and red and somber brown . . . played over the sprays of yellow freesia on the low table, glinting on the copper jar that held them . . . then sinking, to faintly burnish for a moment the brass on the collar of a dog sleeping by the hearth, gave a final flutter and fell to whispering drowsily alone. . . .

Deep in the armchair that was now Julie's, Michael stretched gaitered legs among the sleeping dogs. For a long time he had not stirred. Over and over in his head the same thought turned and twisted, seeking for a way out . . . and came back always to the thing from which it sought to escape,—Julie—Julie—Julie! . . . What a blind fool he had been! With what sublime confidence he had walked into the trap set by his own stupid hands! . . . In his arrogance and stupidity, had he really thought that a man and a woman could do what he had so casually proposed, without one of them getting hit? . . . What if, instead of him, Julie had been that one! Christ! what an escape for her! . . . Staring before him into the shadows beyond the hearth, he saw it all again . . . that white-

clad figure with unbound ruddy hair . . . Julie's lovely startled eyes resting upon him as he knelt by Tess upon the hearth. . . . Once more there seemed to swim about him the fragrance of white violets in the spring—

"Why, Michael!" came softly from the doorway. Slowly still, as though it were part of the dream, Michael turned his head. . . . She was actually standing there in the light of the doorway. It was not a dream.

She did not tell him that it was late, or remind him that Pip and Johnny Dick were coming. . . . Michael remembered now, with sharp contrition, that such was the case . . . For a hushed moment, as though fearing that she might intrude, she stood there. So enchanting, so unaware . . . and strangely gentle. A soft black dress clung to her in long folds, simple and pure in line as her own slender body; pearls—her mother's pearls—were about her round white throat. Her head, with its smooth burnished hair, was tilted, half in doubt.

She came on into the room, and stood looking down at Michael.

"Is anything wrong, Mike?" she asked. And somehow the words seemed to Michael perilously dear and intimate and tender. . . . "You wouldn't want to tell me, perhaps, if it were," she said quickly.

Michael had got to his feet. A terrible need for her swept over him, and after it the greater need for her protection—from it. Out of that, looking into her face, he spoke—almost lightly. "I think I was asleep, Julie," he appeared to confess simply— "Just an old, ancient countryman, you know."

He saw that he had hurt her . . . thrown her friendly

helping hand aside. Furious at his own clumsiness, feeling as though he had hit a child, he could not even explain. . . . Good God, he couldn't hurt her just because—Spontaneously he laid his hands on her shoulders . . .

"You're lovely in the firelight, Julie," he said.

"The firelight is kind, Michael," she answered, and moving away saw that Johnny Dick stood in the doorway.

"Oh—" he whipped out, seeing the pair in the unlighted room, and took an involuntary step backward.

"Ouch!" came Pip's voice. And then: "You great barbarian! . . . You've stamped all over my new dancing pump," the boy mourned drolly. "Scram!" And thrusting past Johnny's lanky form, Pip peered into the room.

"What's the gloom?" he exclaimed. And at the sight of his face Julie laughed. With a jolt, life flew from the serious to the ridiculous. Pip boldly flicked on a light. "Where's Toby?" he asked; "Don't you fellars expect us to eat here?"

"Yes—yes—yes," laughed Michael. "And why not?"

"Well—" Pip hunched his shoulders, "you don't seem to be very—er—expectant looking."

Michael gave an amused grunt. "I'll get Toby—and brush up. Tell Sam to wrastle some ice and lemon juice." He left them, and they heard him dash along the hall and up the stairs, two steps at a time.

"Go on, Johnny: get the stuff," urged Pip, "I want to play a new tune to Julie."

Johnny Dick grinned affably and went off. Pip whisked Julie over to the piano. "It's pretty smooth," he said, and thrust a garish sheet of music on to the rack.

From Michael's den, where he had been delving over some farm accounts, Toby came strolling to the sound of the piano. "Can't we talk it over . . . before it's over?" His nice baritone joined in from the doorway.

To the cool clinking accompaniment of a shaken bowl of cracked ice, Johnny Dick took up the refrain as he came back across the hall from the dining room.

Michael stopped for a moment, on the stairs, to listen. "My God, how I'd *like* to . . ." he muttered, and came on slowly down.

3

The old paneled dining room held a merry company. From above the fireplace, where burned a splendid fire, Great-grandfather Tobias Cochrane in his black stock and high rolling collar, looked down on the long table, with its brass claw feet, that Duncan Phyfe had made for him, where now his great-grandson's wife serenely presided. Contageously amusing, without apparently the shadow of a care, Michael kept the ball of conversation well rolling.

Happy in the belief that somehow Michael had stepped back into the old friendly companionship of the past weeks, gratefully accepting such, without question, and following in his steps, Julie little guessed how her delicious and shimmering gaiety was a further thrust that spurred him to cover his thoughts with a cloak of raillery . . . or knew, as she turned with ready laughter lighting her eyes, in response to some sally from Johnny Dick, how

utterly desirable . . . and how hopelessly far away . . . she seemed to him at that moment.

Since before the loss of her father, whom she had adored, Michael had not seen Julie like that. To-night she was the old, sparkling, unexpected Julie; and watching her once, as for the moment all other eyes were turned upon her, held by some flash of humor from her lips, it came to Michael, with sudden and curious certainty, that he had loved her all the time. . . . If he had only known! . . . And then, looking away from them all, with a brief gay smile for him, Julie had swept him, on a little jet of laughter, into the happy inconsequence of the moment. He felt helpless to withstand her. —For the moment he did not care what happened. . . .

“What was that jig you were knocking out, Pip?” he asked.

. . . “‘Can’t we talk it over? . . . Let’s talk it over’ . . .” Johnny Dick began to hum in a cracked tenor.

“He’s tryin’ to croon his way into Julie’s heart,” murmured Pip wickedly, lifting his eyes just long enough from the splendid bunch of grapes before him to direct a humorous look at his uncle.

“You’ll be well named, me lad, if you swallow another thing,” Johnny broke off to say good-naturedly . . . “*You’ll* be croonin’ to your *Ma*—for a dose o’ ginger.”

Pip grinned and fed a grape to Fanny.

“Let’s all dance to-night!” he suggested, looking up engagingly at Julie. . . . “Get Ma to come over . . . Dad’s crazy about jazz, too. . . . ‘Rudy’, over there, can lead the orchestra. . . .”

Toby gave a crow of laughter. “Go ring ’em up,” he

said, and with a chuckle, "I haven't danced for a year!"

Mutely raising his eyebrows, Pip sent a mischievous questioning glance down the table to Michael.

"I'm game," said the latter, "if Julie is."

Pip tilted his head with comical suddenness in Julie's direction. She nodded, her eyes twinkling assent.

Slapping down his napkin, the boy got swiftly to his feet. "Hot cha! Don't I love Saturday nights!" he let out gleefully, and went off singing in his lovely high voice—"Can't we talk it over . . . ?"

"Cigarette, Julie?" asked Toby, and watching the girl's enchanting face bend over for a light knew how much he wanted to dance with her.

4

Julie and Pip, crowded on to the narrow piano stool, were playing a duet. Johnny Dick, having pried the somnolent Fanny from the leather armchair and slipped into its capacious depths, was carrying on a heated defense of his speculating methods to Toby. The latter, slewed about on the farther end of the fire bench, leaning a strong curve of back to the heat of the fire, lazily shifted his balance now and then to free one of the hands that nursed a bony knee, and removing his pipe from his mouth, with well-turned jibe, and huge enjoyment, prodded his friend to some further excess of rhetorical argument. Michael had gone off to get a bottle of old brandy for Johnny.

The firelight flickered peacefully over the two setters sleeping back to back on the hearth. The lamp on the

table beyond Johnny cast a pool of light on the old waxed boards of the floor. Curled up on a pile of neatly folded rugs by the bookcase, where she had flung herself with as much relief and sense of possession as though all her short life she had waited breathlessly for that moment, slept small black Tess, gently snoring.

The duet ended in a crescendo of crashing cords from Pip, in the bass, to a final hurried trickle from Julie, in the treble. "You're rushing me so!" Julie's voice went up with the notes and burst into helpless laughter.

"I know it," confessed Pip, now doubled over between sobs of laughter.

"Well?" spoke a cheerful voice from the doorway. Tess woke and sent forth a sharp, agitated bark. Pip straightened up and slid off the bench, hauling Julie with him on to her feet.

In a dress of soft, gray chiffon, that billowed about her and floated out behind like wings, Naomi came on, with amused eyes, into the room.

Voices sounded in the hall.

"Julie, my dear, they all *would* come—" Naomi gave a low laugh—"horse, foot, and artillery. You caught us on a Saturday night. —It was too good . . ."

Toby had come up and given his sister a brotherly bear hug and rousing kiss. . . . "Next!" said Johnny with a grin. Pip gave a whoop and darted out into the hall, followed by the wildly barking Tess.

"My God, what a hullabaloo! Come on, Johnny," urged Toby, his blue eyes, as was their wont in intense amusement, narrowing, then opening wide to uncover swiftly-come sparks of devilment. With a "Forrad, little bitch!"

to the expectant Fanny—"Hunt's on!" he whirled the reluctant Johnny forth from the room.

"Come on," said Julie, her eyes brimming with laughter, "Let's go!"

"You're the right wife for a Cochrane," answered a delighted Naomi; and, as they went: "You know the children . . . Tony Barrel—Tom's 'Fidus' . . . his young sister Jinny . . . and Vi Buckley—old John Buckley's grandchild. . . . Spending Sunday," she enlightened.

"You're a wonder, Naomi," was Julie's answer . . . and Tim, in a pair of older-brother long trousers, was upon them—the out-rider. "I came too." He fairly beamed at Julie. "Damn hard luck for Micky he couldn't go out yet . . ."

"Micky's cold didn't stop his trousers from coming," murmured his mother drolly.

Tim only grinned.

Then Julie was shaking hands with a slip of a girl in yellow, with a small piquant face and short, nut-brown curls, and, with a quick shock of surprise, hearing herself addressed as "Mrs. Cochrane."

Naomi lay back in the chair near the fire, where some minutes before she had sunk down with the laughing protest to young Tony Barrel, that she could dance no more. It had been a gay and entertaining hour, and now, in the glow of comfortable fatigue, and a sort of serene detachment, she watched with tranquil eyes the progress of the dance.

. . . Curiously barbaric, this modern dancing . . . Tom—her nice big Tom, growing to look so absurdly like

Sherry—would seem to be chained to one spot in the corner, his arms about the slim yellow figure of Vi Buckley, in the surprisingly possessive manner that appeared to mean nothing, thought Naomi helplessly, to these frank, easy-going young. The nut-brown curls were tucked confidently against Tom's young shoulder, his own sandy head resting upon it. What—thought Naomi with a stab of commiseration—did mothers of girls *do*, these days? Why weren't such poor women's heads white, one and all? . . . Extraordinary times— Untrammelled, inconsequent . . . Speed—ever new and more exotic diversion—sought after with enough energy to build *up* a nation, rather than pull it *down*. And yet, at heart, they were strangely pathetic, the children of this generation—groping, unsure—with all their apparent outward cocksuredness—for what? they hardly knew. They skimmed serenely over the surface, skating on the thinnest ice, as imperturbably as though water, deep and cold, were not beneath. They lolled and smoked, with carmine lips, and slung out crisp, unintelligible phrases, in bald frankness, on subjects that their grandmothers would have blushed to even think upon in the privacy of their own rooms . . . And yet, out of it all, Naomi asked herself honestly, hadn't there come some good? Had not the agelessness . . . all ages melting somehow into one . . . brought the children nearer to their parents? . . . made a stronger bond of frankness between . . . torn down false reserve and foolish inhibitions? She thought suddenly, with a warm sense of happiness, of their own young—hers and Sherry's. "If they are straight, and honorable, and loyal . . . we can't buck the times in the little surface things,"

she decided wisely, and with extraordinary resiliency her thoughts swung back to the concrete moment.

Michael was playing the piano. From where she sat Naomi could watch him. With deep affection her eyes dwelt upon his broad shoulders and fine head. He was looking straight before him,—thinking his own thoughts, was her swift conclusion . . . Unaware of any eyes upon him, a certain somber abstraction seemed to have caught him up and away from them all. In spite of his splendid strength, his bigness of body and mind, there was about Michael, sometimes, something that plucked at Naomi's heart. She felt it now, unreasonably. He could carry a hurt, hidden away like that little Spartan boy of old—and could laugh and never speak of it. He had been like that, with physical things, always . . . Such times, long ago, flashed back to her now. . . . Once, only, under strong inward pressure, he had burst forth harshly to her about a thing that had happened in the war . . . and she had seen then, with a poignancy that appalled her, what he had suffered, untelling. . . . Now, to-night—was there something? He turned his head suddenly, and their eyes met. Across the room, he smiled in that sudden engaging way he had. On a flood of relief she asked herself why she should have had such dreary thoughts of old Michael . . . And just then Julie and Toby came between them, dancing together. With the little mental jab of a thing quickly remembered, her conversation with Sherry came rushing back upon her. Unbelieving, bewildered, her eyes followed the pair of dancers. . . . He was ridiculously good-looking—this younger brother of hers and Michael's . . . Saved, thought Naomi with quick humor,

by a certain natural and unconsciousness recklessness—a naïve unawareness. Young dare-devil he had always been—caring little for consequences that inevitably followed some rash act done on the spur of the moment; and, with equal nonchalance, taking the good things of life, along with the knocks. And yet—generous to a fault—if some thoughtless act of his hurt another, ruefully and ingenuously he sought to make amends. He lacked, entirely, Michael's capacity for endurance, and his strong reserve. What would happen, she asked herself in swift concern, if Toby loved Julie—and Michael—? Did Julie care for Michael? If not—? Watching them dancing now together, those two, she felt a pang of apprehension . . . and then, her eyes upon Julie, forgot to think. There was an effortless grace about the girl's dancing, as in whatever she did,—a certain strength, that could endure: of that the older woman had had good proof. There was about her, too, a subtle aloofness, that somehow added to her charm. To-night, in that clinging black dress, with the pearls about her neck . . . her provocative half smile and beautiful smooth head of flaming hair, she was rather thrilling . . . with the added fascination—to a man—Naomi shrewdly realized, of being utterly unaware, and careless of it. . . . She had said something to Toby. He laughed, and Naomi saw him look quickly down at her face. But Julie's eyes had caught Naomi's. They were smiling in curious serenity, quite oblivious of Toby. — Why didn't Mike dance with his wife? Naomi felt a thrust of surprising irritation. And even as she did, at that very moment Michael abruptly stopped playing, right in the middle of a phrase.

"Damn it!" swore Johnny Dick softly, at Naomi's elbow, "I was just going to ask you to step out."

"Even a worm will turn, Dick," murmured a genial voice from before the hearth. It was Sherry. There came a short spatter of clapping from the two young couples. Drawn a little apart now from Toby, who was close to the piano, Julie was looking at Michael. He suddenly put out his hand and caught Toby by the arm, then got swiftly to his feet. "Play something, Tobe, will you," he said briefly, "I want to dance with Julie." He spoke as though only those three were in the room.

Without a word, or a glance in Julie's direction, Toby sat down at the piano . . . All the laughter had died out of his face. He waited for a moment, then crashed into the tune that had been responsible for the evening, "'Can't we talk it over . . . before it's over?'" . . . They were all singing the catching words. All but Michael and Julie, who, apparently heedless of the song, and apart, danced unsmiling.

"Sherry—" said Naomi to the man who had dropped down on to the arm of her chair, "I'm afraid."

"Can't we talk it over?" he hummed softly.

With swift answering humor, Naomi looked up into the face above. "Yes, thank God, we can," she said; but her soft laughter had a shake in it.

Chapter Seven

I

THEY were burning a great pile of brush at the edge of the cart track that ran along by the river, below the Sheridans'. For some minutes now Julie had been watching, with self-absorbed, troubled eyes, the smoke that rose incredibly blue against the hemlocks on the farther shore. Before her on the old table she used as a desk, in the room that had once been Naomi's, lay a sheet of paper. "Windyhill" was written at the top, and the date: February 17th. Except for that, the sheet was empty. Two yellow roses stood in a small crooked jar of bubbly green glass on the corner of the desk. She drew them absently near and sniffed their spicy fragrance. Then slowly, still absently, she pushed them back, and resting her elbows on the surface of the table, her chin supported in her cupped palms, she stared once more somberly before her down to the great pile of burning brush.

What could she say to Martha Holland? this girl who

had been her friend for so long—who was now married—happily married, there in England. Nothing! She had nothing, she thought bleakly, that could possibly be an answer to that jubilant letter of congratulation.

Not given to over-much analyzing of her thoughts and feelings, and still less to talking of them, in the past, when such had been thrust upon her, it had been to some definite end. Action had been the outcome. Swift and fearless action, upon some clear decision, was natural to her. Life, she well knew, held hardship and sorrow—the loss of those you loved. And these, when they came to her, she had met with courage. For eight months after the death of her father she had lived on in the old house by the brook. Her heart filled with an anguish of loneliness for the man who was gone, she had, nevertheless, with unconscious fortitude faced the future. And, if sometimes she quailed inwardly, she went about the daily task of life with a certain serenity that came from a clear-eyed facing of things, a knowledge gained from living with that keen scholar, Julian Byrd: that giving the best you knew to something bigger than you—that power would use it for the best. . . .

And into that life Michael had broken, asking casually this impossible thing. . . . Suddenly her clarity of vision had become blurred. Blind and deaf to all she should have known—reckless of the consequence for Michael and for herself, she had done this incredible thing. . . .

For a few weeks life had swung along over a tranquil surface. A surface that, because of its cloak of frank and happy comradeship on Michael's part she had accepted with a certain gratitude—for even that quarter loaf. And

then had come that afternoon on the hill with him. . . .

Sitting now before an empty sheet of paper, Julie stirred with a restless motion and suddenly covered her eyes with her hands. A cold, wind-swept hillside rose before her mind's eye. She felt once more the pressure of Michael's arm against hers as he stood beside her . . . knew again that surprising flash of realization, that perilous nearness—to what? . . . then Michael's arm across her shoulders—his words: "Look! . . . a fox!" and the joyous dash, downhill that followed . . . the saving of little Tess. And, at the last, Michael's turning to her for help . . . and afterwards, his quick solicitude for her—and for the puppy. . . . Her unreasoning and fearful happiness there in Johnny Dick's house flooded back to her now . . . and then that night in Michael's den! . . . What had happened? She had found there a man she did not faintly know—as though between them had come some intangible barrier . . . that now grew ever higher and more impenetrable as the days went past. A barrier Michael seemed not even remotely to be aware of . . . that she could not speak of. —What was there to speak about? A thing as airy and intangible as mist—and yet—

She dropped her hands from her face in an abrupt gesture of desperation. God in Heaven! she had done her best. —But it was not good enough. A little spurt of anger flared up at her impotence. Then her eyes traveling unhappily, hardly seeing, off down the hill, suddenly focussed on a moving object. A blue farm wagon piled high with branches of evergreen, and drawn by a plodding chestnut farm horse, had come out from behind the Sheridans'. A huge, fair-haired man—he wore not hat—Chris,

the Swede, walked at the horse's head, leading him along the river road toward the pile of burning brush. In sharp reaction from the maze of thoughts that had been hers for the last few minutes, Julie's mind leaped to the object of the moment. She wanted some branches of hemlock. There below, moving slowly to their doom, went more than she could use. . . .

Three minutes later, in a leather coat of Michael's which she had snatched from the hall, with Fanny and Tess in tow, she was making her way down the hillside over the thin covering of snow that had fallen in the night, toward the fire of burning brush. She arrived there before Chris and stood for a moment watching the flames that crackled and licked up between the branches and twigs. In a sudden draft of air the smoke bent down and drifted past her. Its sharp aromatic tang filling her nostrils, her mind swept clear by the flight down the hill through the frosty air, for a minute she forgot everything but the joy of watching blown smoke drifting upwards into a sky where sweeping mare's tail misted over the westering sun.

Creaking, to the crunch of plodding hoofs, the blue cart drew nearer. Julie turned with a friendly nod for the Swede. "Good afternoon, Chris," she said, and moved toward the big, patient farm horse. Standing with her hand rubbing gently the horse's nose, she spoke: "Are you going to burn all these hemlock branches?"

Chris, ever chary of words, nodded slowly, and throwing the reins over the old horse's rump went round and began to pull off the crisp green boughs. Julie followed him.

"I would like to keep some of them, please, Chris," she said. "I want to put them on my father's grave. To-

morrow would have been his birthday," she ended simply.

The big man stopped and looked at her for a minute, while a sort of dumb compassion flooded into his wide face. "My own Fader ben lost in Yanuary, in deep sea," he burst forth with the suddenness of one who speaks but little. And then, as though overcome by his few brief words, he looked up into the clouds that trailed the sky. "She ben gonta blow," he observed in a colorless tone.

With mute pity, Julie watched him carefully piling the best branches for her. Thus, she thought, did simple souls take the big things of life, in patient and wordless stoicism. It was the better way.

In stolid silence Chris helped her find the hemlock she wanted. She thanked him, and tucking a dozen flat, springy branches under her elbow waited a further moment, watching him throw two great boughs upon the fire. It was cold. A damp, penetrating cold. She pulled Michael's leather coat about her and was conscious now that she wore no hat. The flames had caught the evergreen and burst into a brisk crackling fusillade, sending out a delicious tang that swept about her in a gust of wind from across the river. The smoke, faintly blue, swept upwards and was caught away . . . Curious day! Chris was right. It was going to blow . . . snow perhaps. She wondered what time Michael and Toby would get back from Vermont. They had gone in Michael's car, and the roads might be bad. The mare's tail swept higher now in the west, blurring the sun to a spot of dusky orange. She could hear the faint sougning of the wind in the trees across the river. It was drowned suddenly by fresh crackling as Chris piled on more boughs. She caught sight of Fanny

scouting along on the snow-covered ice at the edge of the river, and looking about for the cocker puppy saw her sitting not far from the fire, on the blue tailboard which Chris had tossed down, to unload. She laughed. "Come on, Tess," she said, "it's cold. . . . Thank you, Chris," she called, and turning away from the fire, she started off up the hill. Tess followed with alacrity. Crossing the slope slantwise, Julie made for the door in the brick wall below the orchard. She would put the hemlock in the potting-shed, where it would keep well, in the cold, until the morning, and not be covered with snow, perhaps, in the night . . .

What a delicious color the door was . . . and the bloom on the old bricks of the wall . . . Her unhappy thoughts were for the time forgotten . . . A fire of brush, the dark trees beyond the frozen, snow-covered river, trailing clouds in a windy sky, had taken their place . . . Her fingers closed on the old iron ring in the door she loved. She turned it.

With a faint protesting creak the door swung open—and Julie found herself face to face with Ambrose Sheridan.

"Hello—genie of the iron ring!" she said, and they both laughed.

"I saw you streaking across the hill for the door in the wall, and lit out to meet you. What are you doing with all that greenery?" He stood looking down in friendly amusement that lighted the hazel eyes behind his metal-rimmed spectacles and deepened the lines in his nice face. "Let me take 'em, Julie."

A warm feeling of friendliness for this big, kindly man, who was a genius, shone in the look she gave him.

"Thanks, Sherry—I'm just going to leave them in the potting-shed." She kept the hemlock clasped beneath her elbow, and without further questioning Ambrose Sheridan walked with her along the snowy path, to where the great silver beech spread a maze of branches over the shed that was tucked against the wall at the end of the garden.

A small, brown rabbit crouching on the straw covering of a cold frame hopped off at their approach, and with a flirt of his white scut whisked away from the cocker puppy's abortive attempt at pursuit, to disappear into a burrow in the late cabbage patch. From a clump of current bushes came a cheerful "dee, dee, dee, dee." A gust of wind swooped down over the wall and blew a strand of hair, like a live flame, across Julie's cheek. If he could only catch her just like that! thought Ambrose with delight, and suddenly remembered his mission.

"Will you give me some tea, Julie?" he asked. "When I came out of the studio and blinked about the house like an old owl, I couldn't find a soul . . ."

"Two lone creatures!" Julie sent him a smile of commiseration. "Mike and Toby went to Vermont."

Sherry nodded. "Hope they won't get stuck up there in a blizzard. The barometer's flirting round 28°—" he observed cheerfully.

Julie gave a chuckle of reminiscent enjoyment. "In Chris's words—'She ben gonta blow—'" she told Sherry, giving an absurdly faithful imitation of the jerky, up and down intonation, and chopped endings, of the Swede; and having come to the shed, she went in and left the sprays of crisp evergreen on an earthy shelf that already held a row of pots and some raffia.

Ambrose Sheridan, watching her come out, thought how few women could look as fascinating, in that old coat she wore . . . hair all ruffled by the wind . . . Her face, as she looked at him, taken up with some inward thought, was unself-conscious as a child's. And yet—she was no child! That he knew.

"I love it all, Sherry!" she said in the still, hushed way she spoke of things that touched her deeply—"brush fires . . . smoke going up into a windy sky . . . little brown rabbits whisking over the snow—" she laughed suddenly—"and the smell of potting-sheds . . . And now—" she sent him a droll sidelong glance—"my soul cries aloud for hot tea. Does yours, Sherry?"

Ambrose Sheridan wondered, even as he gave a laughing answer, if Michael dimly knew this woman,—if any man could.

2

They came into the cheerful warmth of the old hall, to find Sam Tooth in the act of laying a great log of apple-wood on the fire. In some manner known only to Fanny herself, the spaniel had got there before them and, ever assiduous in looking to her creature comforts, was already curled possessively at the end of the settle nearest the hearth. As the door shut, her tail thumped the seat, and Sam, coming stiffly to an upright position, sent a comically distressed glance at Julie.

"It wint out on me," he confessed. "Whin the wind do be risin' it dhraws the shmoke its choice ways." A smudge

was across his nose. His eyes blinked, watering from his efforts carried on in the depths of the fireplace.

"I know, Sam," agreed Julie with perfect gravity, "but it looks splendid now. . . . I think we'll have tea right here. Can we?"

"Ye can have it in any mortal spot ye have a mind, Mrs. Michael." It was plain for all to see what Sam Tooth thought of his new mistress.

"'Lo, Sam," laughed Sherry. "How's the rheumatism?"

The old man rubbed a leg absently. "It twitches at me whin the rain comes, Mr. Sherry," was his sober answer. And with a last look at the recalcitrant fire he turned and scuffled off.

Julie tossed her coat over a chair and walked toward Fanny and the settle. "My hair's flying wild, and my hands are covered with pitch; but I'm not goin' to do a thing about it, Sherry," she said. She leaned to tilt a log, letting the flames through a chink. "Poor old Sam— He never could do much with a fire," she murmured.

Sherry was getting off his things. Something fell, with a slap, on to the floor. Julie turned to see him stoop and pick up an envelope. He fished some others from a deep pocket, and looked across at her with a smile.

"Lucky it fell out, Julie. I clean forgot. Your mail was left with ours, by mistake." He gave her a thin long envelope. "The rest is all for Mike, I think," he said; "shall I put it in his den or somewhere?"

"Thanks, Sherry—will you?" He went off across the hall and left her standing with the envelope in her hand. Casually she opened it.

She saw that the heading was a firm of lawyers. Her father's lawyers. Her eyes went swiftly on down the page.

"... To advise you that all interest on mortgage for said house and estate ceases . . . The mortgage being paid off in full . . . Clear of all encumbrances and entailment, said estate stands in your name. . . ."

At first the words, with no special meaning, seemed to jump at her from the thin paper. Once more she read it through. And then, swift and hot as flame, the full import caught her—Michael had done this thing! He had— Oh, God!

Someone was speaking to her—disconnected words, from miles away,—Sherry: "... that little bronze filly on Mike's desk . . . clever!" Slowly crushing the letter into a ball in her hand, she thrust it into the pocket of her sweater. With a sickening sense that the earth had fallen away from beneath her feet, she turned to face Ambrose Sheridan.

"What, Sherry?" she asked, trying desperately to bring her mind to focus on the present need. Then: "Yes—yes—" she got out: "Pat English—did it."

"Nothing wrong?" asked Sherry quickly, forgetting all about the filly, at the whiteness of the girl before him—the strange look in her eyes . . . clouded with some secret fear.

Julie looked at Ambrose, as the difficult color flooded up into her face; and her eyes strove to shut this thing away from him.

"It's—just an explanation, Sherry—that's all." A door opened. Sam was there . . . "Let's have some tea," she said with an attempt at lightness, at once gallant and pathetic, followed by a little shaken laugh. Wise Ambrose Sheridan held his peace—for the moment.

Sitting side by side on the old pine settle, they drank

their tea and ate hot scones. At least, the man did. And if Julie only nibbled at something, and then, giving up all pretense of hunger, fed the whole thing to a delighted dog, her companion appeared to be comfortably oblivious. They talked, and even laughed, as though Ambrose Sheridan did not see that the girl's eyes were overdark, and that her hand, taking a lighted match from his, shook.

And after a little, as he leaned back smoking his pipe, in the corner of the settle, looking past Julie into the fire, Ambrose spoke of the thing he had come for. Offhand and casual, on purpose, he made a simple statement: "Mike wants me to paint your portrait, Julie," he said.

She did not answer right away, and when he felt that she was looking at him out of her silence, he turned his head to meet her eyes. "Why?" she asked surprisingly, and he saw that something—an expression that he did not understand—had crept into her face. . . something that hurt to see.

But he only smiled. "The reason is obvious, I think," he answered lightly,—“two of them, really. You are rather uniquely thrilling to look at, you know—or perhaps you really don't—and you are Mike's wife.”

She looked at him strangely for a moment, as though she hardly saw him. "I don't think I will, Sherry," she said slowly at last.

He nodded, as if he understood perfectly, and then added as an afterthought, faintly rueful, "I'm sorry, Julie, I wanted to paint you."

"Waste of good time, Sherry," she told him, with a shrug . . . "Give me a light, will you? My cigarette's gone out."

But as he left, shortly after, he asked when Michael was getting back; and being told casually by Julie that she wasn't sure, he came closer and laid a hand on her shoulder.

"I'm nothing but an old painter fellar," he said with sudden gentleness, "but sometimes I see things. I know enough to shut my eyes and keep my mouth shut too . . . if that's best. But . . . when it isn't,—*if* it isn't— You'd tell me, wouldn't you, Julie?" he finished simply.

She reached up swiftly and caught down the hand from her shoulder. Then just stood without any words for a moment.

"Life's a curious thing, Sherry," she said at last. And with an odd smile straight into his eyes: "You're one of the very nice things in it, my dear."

Grasping strongly for a second the hand she held, she let it go—as though dismissing, with that gesture, what had gone before. "Give my love to Naomi," she said, "and tell Pip I'm coming soon now for the puppy."

Accepting Julie's decision (if subtly given, such he took it to be): "Good-night," he said. "Thanks for the tea."

As he opened the door a gust of raw air swooped in to the fire and dragged out a waft of smoke. "'Night, Julie," he said again, and was gone.

For a minute Julie stood perfectly still where he had left her. Then she turned slowly and walked to the hearth, where Michael's spaniel slept in untroubled tranquillity. Sinking to her knees beside the dog, one hand going out blindly to seek the comforting living warmth, she stared before her, unseeing, while the slow, hot tears burned her eyes— "So—" she whispered—"it was that— Oh, Michael!"

Chapter Eight

I

I 'M coming—" He was calling frantically against the dark void of rushing wind that separated him from Julie. Someone held him by the shoulders. With a frenzied wrench, he freed himself—and woke to find that he had thrown the bedclothes from him and struggled to his elbow. For a second, the confused nightmare quality of the dream still with him, Michael stared before him at a window he did not know. It rattled in a sudden onslaught of wind, that tore, with the sound of rushing water, through some big tree beyond.

—Or *was* it rushing water? Sharply, then, consciousness flooded back upon him. It was both. Wind and water. Unfrozen rapids of the river beyond the narrow road; wind in a gaunt ash tree growing close to the hillside farmhouse in Vermont.

"My God, what a night!" he muttered, and started to retrieve a quilt that had slipped to the floor. Instead,

suddenly swinging his legs out of bed, he got up. Stooping to avoid the long slope of the eaves, he made for the spot of lesser darkness that was the window. The boards of the floor were ice-cold beneath his bare feet. He rapped his shin on the corner of a forgotten chest, and swore softly at the pain; then drew in his breath sharply as a hard gust of cold wind met his chest.

It wasn't snowing—yet; but it would before morning. Crouching swiftly, he thrust his head out of the window, trying to see the sky. There *was* none. Sky and earth were one, in a tumult of rushing sound. He could not see the river, though its roar seemed to be right beneath him.

Back in bed, he pulled the slippery old quilts close under his chin and lay wide-eyed to the folds of darkness blowing over him. He wished suddenly, unreasonably, that he and Toby had been able to get home . . . That ridiculous wild-goose chase of nearly two-hundred miles—to find a herd of perfectly good-grade cows—nothing more! He remembered, with a touch of reluctant humor, Toby's cryptic and rather Rabelasian comment on the huddle of sheep offered. He *had* been entertaining. But they might both have been in their own beds now at Windyhill—instead of miles off in the wilds, with a run back over those God-awful roads—through a possible blizzard! What an ass he had been to let Toby persuade him to come in his car.

God! he thought, in sudden and desperate realization of the real import of his absurd annoyance over a thing that once he would have done without a thought. If Julie could have come with them, he wouldn't lie, now,

wishing to be back at Windyhill. If she were here, in this room— Roughly, with a curious sense of shame, he thrust such thoughts from him. . . . What a brick she had been, over the telephone that afternoon! Then, in a flash of reason: Why should she be lonely there to-night, really? How was it different for her from hundreds of other nights?

He stirred impatiently, as though trying to throw off some weight that clung to him—to rid himself of the intolerable confusion of the future—and, forcing himself to relax, tried to hold his mind to the commonsense fact, that three or four o'clock, in a pit of wind-driven darkness, was no time to think of *anything*, if you wanted to make sense out of it. Instead, every thought he tried to put away—just because of it—came swarming, seething on the dark, to face him. . . . Julie, riding beside him on old Solomon . . . the sudden turn of her head . . . Her unconscious aloofness, that held such a charm, even as it put him off . . . Julie pouring out his coffee, her eyes bent gravely upon the work of her hands . . . Her sudden smile . . . the tilt of her pointed chin . . . Her head, so smooth and burnished, resting against the back of a chair . . . her eyes raised to his . . . The look upon her face, gay and suddenly whimsical, as she met a remark from one of Naomi's boys . . . And then, queerly, there came before him the expression he had caught for one moment in the eyes she had turned to him that day when she had stood with a brush of blue paint before the old farm wagon, as young Martin asked him that crazy question about babies coming— Almost as though for a flash of time she had been afraid— Afraid of what?

he asked himself. . . . He did not remotely know this girl who was his wife,—not dimly— How, now, could he begin? It was too dangerous.

He saw her then, with a curiously inconsequent twist of thought, standing beside him before the altar . . . contained, quiet, though the hand he had put the ring upon had not been too steady. . . . Swiftly then, for the first time, a startling question sprang to his mind: Why had Julie married him? He lay there, every muscle tense with the shock of that question—and had no answer but the noise of wind and seething water, that seemed to pour over him, baffling and uncaring.

. . . Could it possibly have been because she knew more than he guessed of what he had done for her father, when, in a world gone mad, the work of years had come toppling about his fine head? —Gratitude? He felt hot all over: God! could it be that? . . . He had taken all she could give, under the circumstances. And what had he offered? Just that Julie toe the line that he had drawn with such sublime stupidity, such incredible blindness. . . . He had suggested, with what complacency, that the life of a woman like Julie should be cut off, with no fulfillment—nothing! He writhed, mentally, at such a thought.

Then, in quick reaction, cold reason flooded in, chilling, unsatisfying: That—marrying a man whom she did not love—who had frankly—crudely, as he now saw—said what he had—would not be Julie's idea of gratitude. What, then—? He would never know, perhaps. He could not, after all this, insult her further by questioning her motives.

She must never know of the bit he had been able to do. Coming now, that might hold her against her will—Or take her away . . . Which? he thought desperately. Which would be worse? "God! I don't know," he muttered aloud to the night. If she were happy—he would see that she was happy! he told himself fiercely—he could go on—he would have to go on—following what lead she gave him. He couldn't just grit his teeth and go blindly at it, either. It was subtle, perilously subtle. By one wrong move he might shatter the whole frail structure of this absurd house of cards.

That Julie might some day come to love him never entered his head. His whole strength and mind were concentrated on dealing with what, alone with the poignancy of his own feelings, seemed hopelessly unchangeable.

How he ever got to sleep again he did not know; but he must have . . . A wan light, which he had not watched come, was faint upon the things in the room. He could see one big branch of the ash tree toss and strain in the wind, sliding, dark and tortured, across a pale gray sky. Storm-ridden, the dawn was breaking.

Seven hours later, after what seemed a lifetime of wind and bad roads and broken tires, and at last a blur of fine stinging snow—in a state of weariness and suppressed irritation at cars and tormenting ruts and—yes, Toby, Michael ran the long gray roadster into its resting-place at the barn, and two silent men walked side by side through what had now become a blizzard, down the half obliterated ruts of the lane to Windyhill.

2

"I wonder where Julie is." Standing before the fire in the hall, with his back to Michael, who was putting on Fanny's collar, which in the dog's vociferous welcome had somehow come off, Toby threw out the words with apparent unconcern.

"I don't know," Michael rapped forth, getting up from his knees, where he had dropped to wrestle with the collar buckle.

Toby swung about and, with lifted eyebrows, gave a short bark of a laugh.

"You needn't snap my head off, Mike," he said . . . "It was a perfectly natural question, wasn't it? With a blizzard goin' on outside, to ask where you thought your wife had gone . . ."

"Look here, old man," said Michael, suddenly serious and quiet, "we won't scrap over Julie."

"Certainly not," answered Toby dryly. "I had no such intention. . . . It was a mean afternoon, that's all . . ." With a shrug of his big shoulders that would seem to dismiss all further interest, he dropped to the settle and hauled Tess into his lap. "How's the little rat?" he asked, pulling a floppy ear, as if nothing had happened.

Crushing down a surge of annoyance at the thought that he and Toby should have barked out so ridiculously like two terriers at each other, letting Toby have the last word, Michael walked over to the window and looked out. . . . Where *was* Julie? Sam didn't know—or Naomi. Old Joe hadn't the faintest notion that she

had gone out, even. He had called up Uncle David—Where else was there? —Jane! He couldn't be such an ass as to call Jane. If Julie were there she would be all right. With a restless motion he rammed his hands deep into his pockets and stared with absurd uneasiness, and some irritation, into the whirls of fine snow that swept past, blurring the earth and obliterating the sky. The wind boomed suddenly down the chimney. Fanny came and sat disconsolately against his leg. He swung about and looked at Toby slumped there on the settle with the cocker puppy sleeping upon his knees.

"I'm going to get my car, Toby," he said. "Will you come?" It was almost as though he held out a peace offering.

With perfect composure, Toby seemed to disregard any such opening, if such it were. He looked at his brother and simply shook his head. Only as an after-thought he volunteered, "Unless you want me?" His eyes had dropped to the dog in his lap—hiding his thoughts from Michael.

"No," came the one crisp word. Then: "Will you get Sam to have some tea ready?" Michael was struggling into his overshoes—somewhat impeded by the eager inquisitive nose the water spaniel thrust in his way.

A loud rap came on the door.

Toby, like one in a trance, never even lifted his head. But Michael wheeled about and made for the door. He opened it, and without a word, like a storm-driven partridge, the bulky figure of the Swede swept in. Michael slammed the door behind him.

"What is it, Chris?" he asked.

"Mrs. Cochrane—" the man began, "mit dose brandges of hemlog . . ."

"What are you talking about, man?" Michael spoke sharply.

"She take dem in her liddle small car—to de Fader's grave . . . for de birtday. She ben gone a long time, Mr. Michael." The colorless voice stopped. The man's pale eyes roved up over Michael's face. His glance caught and held there by a pair of stern eyes, he repeated stolidly, "She ben gone a long time." And in the same tone: "She ben bad vedder, out dere."

"Thank you, Chris," said Michael shortly. Then: "Go get some coffee." The big man looked at his master for a moment, unsmiling, then, turning slowly away, clumped off across the hall. Still Toby sat staring down at the small black ball asleep on his knees. Without a glance in his direction Michael went out.

Very slowly, then, Toby lifted his head and looked bleakly at the closed door. He knew at that moment, face to face with his own soul, in a flash of tormenting clarity, that he was making of Mike's need for him a cloak for his own greater need for Michael's wife. Jane's words cut sharply in, shouldering past all else: ". . . a clear field. . . ." "I can't!" he whispered fiercely— "My God—I can't go!" Then he did a curious thing. Very carefully depositing Tess on the seat beside him, he got up, and, like a man walking in his sleep, made for the library. Going straight to the piano, he sat down; and with a sudden reckless laugh plunged into that foolish, catching bit of jazz Pip had brought there on that night, a week ago, when he had danced with Julie.

3

Bent over to meet the force of the gale, half blinded by the fine stinging snow, Michael plodded through the deepening drifts, along the now completely obliterated ruts of the lane, climbing the hill to the gate.

A strange jumble of half coherent thoughts and frustrations gathered impetus as he fought against the wind that tore down upon him. He was glad there was something to fight against. What a damned ass he had been to snap Toby up like that over a simple question! He was all so bound about with restrictions, he thought in an access of blind resentment,—so hopelessly at sea as to each move he made in this strange, unfamiliar game he had plunged into. He couldn't even show to Toby that he was disturbed about Julie. In God's name, why? Every simple, natural act now toward Julie must be so carefully thought out—so wary. He had never done things in that way before. It was new to him, and distasteful. Sometimes, he felt, he didn't know what he *was* doing, or saying. . . . Where was she now? Why in hell had they gone off on that idiotic wild-goose chase, and left her alone!

He had almost reached the gate. Great swirls of stinging particles swept about him and tore on past down the hill. God, what a wind! Could Julie be out in this—stuck somewhere? He struggled on and came to the road, plowed through a drift and stopped. Sheltering his face with a mittened hand, he peered through half-shut eyes into the blinding snow that whirled towards him

down the road. He could see nothing. And then, even as he turned to make for the barn, he thought he heard a faint sound. He swung about and strained his eyes in its direction. And the next minute, on the wings of the blizzard, Julie seemed literally to be driven against him. He threw out an arm to steady her, and for a second stared into a pale face and a pair of laughing eyes . . . "I got stuck, Michael." The words came to him faintly, as from miles away. . . . Suddenly all the thoughts of the past night, the suppressions and torments, his hidden apprehension for her safety, now relieved, seemed to burst within him into a flood of paradoxical anger at the sight of Julie's white face and game, laughing eyes. He caught her up, almost roughly, like a child, into his arms: "Don't go walking off into a blizzard again!" he said harshly.

"Why, Michael, I—" she began to protest in amazement.

"I've told you not to—that's all," he whipped out. And turning, he carried her, plunging in grim silence, unbroken by Julie, through the driving snow, down the hill. The wind rushed swooping past them. Its force was terrifying. Once Michael floundered in a drift. He never once spoke. Nor did Julie.

They reached the house. Somehow, with Julie still in his arms, he got the door open. Leaving it wide to the storm, he crossed the empty hall and went on doggedly up the stairs, to her room. There, all snow-covered as she was, he put her down in the old wing chair by the fire.

Without a glance into her face he went down upon his knees, and with deft quickness got off her snow-clogged overshoes.

Mutely, in a sort of speechless bewilderment, Julie let this strange unaccountable Michael have his way, even allowing him to draw her to her feet and take off her coat and fur cap.

For a moment, then, the two stood motionless, looking at each other. At last: "I'll send Hannah up with something hot," Michael said queerly . . . "Get straight to bed." He turned and went out of the room. Julie, still dumb with amazement, watched him go.

Suddenly, before her startled eyes the room swam, her knees felt weak— Could it be—? Swift, hot blood flooded through her weary body and flamed in her face— Did Michael—? Could it be possible—that after all—? She did not dare to finish such a thought in words. Instead, while the blood drained away from her face, leaving it once more very pale, she stared, unseeing, at the doorway, where a moment ago Michael had been. Then, with a little incredulous laugh for her foolish fancies, she turned abruptly away, and going over to her dressing table began, with fingers still numb from the cold, to do as she had been so curtly bid.

4

Old Hannah had come bustling up with steaming tea and the scones Julie loved, had fussed over her like a hen over an ailing and only chick, and departed, almost on tiptoes, as though leaving a sick room. How nice it was, sometimes, to be fussed over and petted a bit! Julie was surprised at the emotion that welled up, uncomfortably

near to tears, as she saw the door shut behind the kind old woman.

In her soft white wrapper, propped against the pillow in the wide four-poster, with a braid on either shoulder and her eyes looking very big, Julie might have been some lonely child waiting forlornly for a mother—who did not come—to say good-night.

She did not feel forlorn. Julie was not prone to self-pity or futile railing against life. Her thoughts, at the moment, were anything but those of a child—lonely or otherwise. With a curious calm, born, perhaps, of a numbed mind and real physical exhaustion, together with the warmth that stole through her body from the reviving tea, for some minutes after Hannah had gone she lay back against the pillows, letting her eyes rest on the flicker of the fire in the half light of the room . . . her thoughts hovering on the outskirts of that thing which waited inexorably in the back of her mind for the inevitable moment of recognition and reckoning. . . .

Stretched in an attitude of abandonment, paws in air, half slewed about, Tess slept close against Julie's knee. A book covered with smooth green leather, its title in gold, had slipped down and lay half hidden by the puppy's soft black ear. Julie's eyes came back at last from the slumberous wavering firelight playing over the back of the wing chair, and dropped in a sort of abstraction to the sleeping dog. Tess's absurd attitude, so utterly and blissfully abandoned, broke through into her consciousness. She smiled . . . "Lucky mite," she whispered: "Somebody's dog—who cares . . . Not such a bad life, Tess," she finished in a little burst of irony. Then turn-

ing the puppy gently over, she retrieved the book, and involuntarily opened to the flyleaf. Michael Cochrane—the letters in a small, strong hand stood out before her. She remembered, with a vivid stab of recollection, watching Michael sign his name, forming those letters with swift firm strokes—on their marriage certificate.

Slowly she shut the book, and with it still in her hands sat for a moment looking before her—at nothing. How curiously little she knew of Michael, really—the inward, thinking man. Married to him, living under his roof, seeing him at the little daily tasks, in the casual everyday contacts, she knew the real Michael not at all. In some curious paradoxical way, with the form of marriage accomplished, the tangible, knowable Michael had vanished . . . Become an illusive figure . . . quite unknowable. And yet, she thought, because he was simple and friendly still—just because of that apparent openness and frankness—it was all the harder to put her finger on any actual change,—more impossible to get past the subtle barriers which, consciously or not, Michael had built up. . . . If she could talk to him frankly, as she had so many times—before. —She could not. . . . How could she speak simply and quietly to the Michael who had so roughly grasped her in that welter of snow and carried her in mute obstinacy, stalking down the hill, tramping somberly across the hall and on up the stairs? —A Michael who issued terse, clipped commands: Don't do this,—do that—and that. . . .

Her eyes dropped once more to the book lying in her hands. —And she had thought for one brief, mad moment— What had she not thought, in that second after

Michael had shut the door and gone away? She shook her head. No— He had treated her harshly, with hardly suppressed irritation, almost with anger. She laughed suddenly, a little bitter, incredulous laugh. Then in a wave of frightened horror at herself—at the future, she reached out instinctively to grasp the picture of her father standing on the table beside her.

For a long minute she looked at the face before her,—that fine head, those long smiling eyes, the sensitive mouth, that was yet strong—wishing with acute and poignant longing for the man himself, back once more . . . Near her, to talk to, to laugh with—to be steadied by his sure and sane advice. He would have known so unfailingly what she must say—what do. Ah—but if he were here, she would never have left him. Never. They would have been together this moment in that old house beyond the hill, with the orchard climbing behind, the brook chuckling past under the hemlock. The old house! That was the thing she had pushed far back in her mind . . . dreading to face it— Oh, God, what must she do? . . .

Her first instinct on reading the letter which Sherry had so innocently given to her, after the meaning of it had penetrated her mind, had been to sell— Yes, in a sort of agony of shame, almost of anger against Michael—to sell the house that he had made hers . . . To get out from beneath an intolerable burden of indebtedness to Michael. A plain act of revolt. . . . Then, in swift revulsion to that impulse, had come the bewildering recollection of her relation to Michael— She was his wife. —This was a generous act—to her, as his wife. Oh, but was it? When

had he done this thing? . . . Lying there now, cared for and warm, sheltered by Michael's roof from the storm without, some of that first desperate recoil abated and grew more calm. She had something to thank Michael for, first, before she made any further move. That move, when it came, must be made with clear eyes and a steady heart. She could not hurt Michael by flinging his generosity back into his face. Her father would not have done that—ever!

With a last look, as though for reassurance, Julie put the little picture back on the table, drawing nearer, at the same time, the crooked jar of green glass, with its two yellow roses, which when she had brought them over from her desk yesterday—could it be only yesterday that she had sat before that still unfinished letter to Martha Holland?—had been closely folded buds. Now, in all their glory, they showed their orange hearts, glowing in the pool of light from the low lamp beside her, filling the room with their spicy fragrance. A sudden gust boomed in the chimney. Julie's eyes went involuntarily to the window. But the storm whirled past, unseen. Darkness had blotted out all but the sound. . . . What was Michael doing? Was he still—? No—it was her house she must think about. She had not looked again at that letter since Sherry had come upon her, there, by the fire in the hall, and she had crushed it into a ball and crammed it ruthlessly into her pocket. She would read it now, calmly and reasonably.

Getting up carefully so as not to disturb the sleeping puppy, she crossed to her closet, and finding the sweater she had worn, sought in the half light for the right-hand

pocket. No ball of crumpled paper was there. None in the other pocket. Crouching quickly she felt about the closet floor. It was not there, either. She straightened up and tried to think back. Hadn't it been there last night? She did not know . . .

And as she stood there, her eyes fastened in concentration on the play of firelight over the top of a brass andiron, she became aware of footsteps coming along the hall. Startled from their absorption, her eyes flew swiftly to the door. Unable to move, she simply waited. —Michael was coming! —Why? The footsteps stopped. Then, as though repeating something that had already sounded in her mind, a knock came upon the door.

Holding close about her the soft white thing she wore, her head lifted, she answered to the knock: "Yes?" Absurdly hard, her heart knocked within her. "Come in—"

Slowly the door opened. Michael stood there looking at her. At the sight of her poised as though for flight before the open closet, there came over his face the quick smile Julie knew so well. In sheer relief, she laughed. Then, before she thought, she was speaking: "The ogre has caught me. Why don't you say, 'Fee, Fie, Fo, Fum', Michael?"

"Are you looking for him in the closet—the English-mun?" he asked, as though nothing of any moment were between them.

At that Julie sobered and came to earth.

"I'm looking—for a letter I lost, Michael," she answered simply.

"I've come to explain something about that letter," said Michael quietly.

5

Too amazed to utter a word, Julie watched Michael shut the door. Separated from him by the big wing chair, with one hand resting on the high back, the other holding the soft flimsiness of her wrapper about her, a ruddy, child-like braid on either shoulder, she waited, in large-eyed wonder. Thus, as he turned, Michael saw her.

The man who had stood there before Julie an hour ago, mute, inimical, was gone . . . as though part of a confusing nightmare. Julie felt, with a thrust of queer comfort, that he was for the moment at a loss as to how to begin.

But even as the thought came to her, Michael surprised her once again. He was smiling at her—a slow smile that deepened the lines in his face. He came over to her, and resting one knee on the arm of the chair, with a hand on either side of hers, looked whimsically into her face.

“You little naughty, red-haired thing,” he said slowly, and his eyes glinted in the firelight with an amused sparkle. “You ought to be in bed!”

And suddenly Julie *felt* like a naughty child, caught, but absurdly happy. . . . This was the Michael she knew—who made things terribly possible . . . Even quarter loaves.

She leaned forward impulsively, with her elbow on the back of the chair, smiling straight into his eyes. One long, burnished braid slipped down across his wrist. “Ogre!” she mocked softly, on a little rush of happiness.

For one breathless second, as she saw the smile die out

of his eyes, she had the extraordinary sensation that he was going to kiss her. With some instinct of self-preservation, come as quickly as light travels, she had moved her elbow from the back of the chair, and Michael, on his feet, was saying something. She looked up in curious confusion to meet his eyes. They were simply friendly—friendly and grave. On the palm of his hand, held out to her, was a crumpled ball of paper. “It’s this, isn’t it?” he was saying evenly, almost casually.

He gave it into her keeping. Mutely she took it. “I’m going to pull this old chair about,” he said . . . “I’ll tuck you into it with a quilt, and stir up the fire . . . I’d like to explain something, if I can, Julie.”

“Yes, Michael,” she answered quietly. But beneath that quiet voice her heart beat thickly.

Seated in the old chintz-covered chair, watching Michael go over to the bed and pull off the green silk puff, she thought, with an involuntary smile, that never before in one day had she been ministered to in so many and varying ways . . . Somewhere far off in a world that did not touch her, the wind swooped high over the chimney. A sudden gust, more fierce than any before, swept snow about the end of the house to whisper and rustle against the window. It was all remote. Here in the firelight, warm, fragrant and friendly, the old room, with Michael in it, was for the moment complete . . . all that mattered. . . .

Tess had come to life. Stretching luxuriously, she walked to the foot of the bed, where, head a-cock, she watched with interested eyes the corner of the quilt trail behind Michael across the floor. She gave a sudden gurgle of a bark, and flopping down with her paws over the edge of the bed

looked longingly at the floor below. Her tongue out, she panted, and added another short bark.

"Come on, silly," said Michael without looking round. The puppy dropped on to the rug with a subdued thud, stretched again, gave a cavernous yawn that ended in a squeak, then walked solemnly after Michael over to Julie and jumped into her lap.

Michael, the quilt caught across him, his hands on his hips, looked down at the pair in the chair. "You know a good thing when you see it, Tess; and you don't wait long—to take it, do you?" He laughed softly, and bending over tucked the green silk thing about Julie's knees. Humming a tune, he wound the quilt deftly about her feet and slid up a stool to rest them on. Once he smiled up at her in a detached but friendly way that made Julie feel like a child. "I'm as helpless as a mummy," she told him, smiling back. "That's just what I need," he answered with a sudden droll look, unexpected and engaging.

He got some logs out of the old green chest beyond the hearth, and went down on his knees for the business of fixing the fire to his satisfaction. Watching him, Julie knew a moment of intense happiness. This was worth much that might come after. . . . She found herself noticing how the crisp hair on the back of his head swept across in a sort of cowlick, dented in where his hat had been. Right in the nape of his neck a quirk of hair curved upwards—like the tail feathers of a duck, she caught herself thinking with delight. . . . He was very lovable and human. She wanted suddenly, with surprising urgency of desire, to put out her hand and smooth

down that funny little tail feather. She loved him unspeakably . . .

She dropped her eyes from the big kneeling figure to the puppy in her lap . . . Michael was getting to his feet. Looking up again she found his eyes resting upon her with quiet scrutiny.

"That's one of about ten ways,—all perfect," he said slowly. He stood with his hands thrust deep in his pockets, his shoulders stretched tense, showing clearly the powerful frame of him beneath the thin leather thing he wore, and regarded Julie with a quizzical air, his eyes faintly smiling, as though no such thing as a bit of crumpled paper grew hot in the clutch of her hand—waiting for an explanation.

Julie rested her head against the wing of the chair and sent back a slanting look from under dark eyelashes:

"I haven't the faintest idea what you're driving at, Mike," she said.

"Something I want Sherry to do," he answered.

"Oh—that—" and very slightly, unconscious that she did so, Julie slowly moved her head in negation.

"Is that the answer you gave Sherry?" asked Michael oddly.

"Yes, Mike," she answered quietly, looking down to the ball of crushed paper in her hand.

Without another word, asking no explanation, Michael bowed his head once in a measured and final acceptance. And Julie, wanting with overwhelming and sudden distress, to explain, knew a feeling of hopeless impotence.

He was calmly drawing his cigarette case out of a deep pocket. "Want one, Julie?" he asked. "Or perhaps you don't—here."

For reply, she simply reached out to the low table at her side for a box of matches. Lighting one, she held it up, with a smile. "You're rather nice, Michael," she said unexpectedly.

"You—?" he offered, holding out the case. She shook her head, and he bent over quickly to light his at the proffered match, then taking it from her tossed it into the fire and turned to face her.

"I found that bit of paper in the bottom of the wood box in the hall, Julie," he said, looking soberly down upon her.

"Oh—" Julie barely breathed the word.

"I was putting a log on the fire down there—after—Just now when I went down," he finished steadily. "I picked it up and was going to throw it into the fire . . . Then—I looked at it first—to see. . . . I am glad it happened, my dear," he went on simply, "for it needs an explanation."

His eyes went to the cigarette between his fingers. He flicked off the ash very carefully, then spoke, half to himself: "Old fool, Potts . . . They're so terribly over-meticulous about things that don't matter a damn, those lawyer chaps." He broke off and looked up at Julie. "I'll have to go back a bit," he said thoughtfully.

Thus far Julie had said no word, nor made a sign, to interrupt Michael. Now, suddenly, as she found herself on the point of hearing something that she had longed to know, she felt a sharp recoil. He was so quiet, and

simple, and frank, this Michael. He had done this generous act. Why should she put him in the position of having to explain a kindness. It became to her, for him, suddenly humiliating, and unfair.

He was saying something which in the stress of her feelings she had not taken in. . . . With a swift motion, at once gentle and imperative, she stretched out her hand. "Wait, Michael!" she said. "My dear—why should you do this?"

With profound surprise, Michael simply stood looking down at her. She felt the slow blood mounting in her face; but she held her eyes upon him, unwavering.

Then: "—Why should I, Julie?" he echoed queerly . . . "I did it for your father . . ."

Julie gave a sorry shake of her head, then broke out: "Please—please, Mike— Listen to me, first."

She saw his eyes grow dark, till they seemed to smoulder with a sort of somber fire . . .

"Perhaps it's better that nothing were said." His voice came to her with a shock of quiet force. In acute desperation at the turn things had taken—a sort of agony of futility for the things that now she could not say—or hear—she made a little gesture of acquiescence.

"Perhaps—" she said in a low voice. Tess stirred and got suddenly to her feet. The ball of crumped paper, that had come to rest in a fold of the quilt, flicked lightly off and bounced upon the rug at Michael's feet.

He bent over, quite casually, and Julie saw him pick it up and toss it into the fire.

Footsteps were coming along the hall. Someone knocked on the door. Michael pushed his hands deep into his

pockets, hunching his shoulders high, and glanced at Julie. "Your supper," he murmured. "Do you want it?"

Somehow she mustered a smile. "I think so, Michael," she answered.

"Come in!" he called, and, not waiting for further developments, walked over to the chair where Julie sat. "Shall I take Tess out?" he asked . . . "Must be about a foot of snow now."

"Don't lose her, Mike," was all Julie said, as she held the sleepy puppy up to her husband.

Thus, apparently in amicable connubial converse, old Hannah found them, as she bore in a tray.

With easy good nature, and a complete composure that Julie felt hopelessly far from, Michael surveyed the oncoming tray. "Giving Mrs. Michael a good feed, Hannah?" he asked the old woman.

"Your own is waitin' on ye, Mr. Mike. Mr. Toby's famished," was her retort, with the respectful familiarity of long service in the Cochrane household.

Michael gave a short laugh, and with Tess tucked under his arm started for the door.

"Thanks, Mike—for everything," said Julie suddenly.

He turned and looked at her queerly for a moment, over Hannah's head . . . "For nothing," he corrected, and was gone.

Sitting in the library, across the width of the hearth from Toby, Michael struggled to bring his world back

to the old sane footing—from the confusion and chaos into which he had been caught up—or pulled down, he thought, with a feeling of hopelessness where no gleam of humor penetrated. With a sort of callousness possessed by the elements, the blizzard rushed in fury at the windows beyond a silent Toby, who, his nose buried in a book, calmly—or not?—offered no help to Michael. . . .

He didn't want help. Out of the long habit of loneliness, and often harsh self-discipline, he did not ask for that, or know the need. It was, rather, the strong desire for solitude which ached within him . . . No one there—not even Toby—to see him struggling to ride this blind country. . . . No! he didn't mean that. He had begged the boy to stay . . . and Julie— In an access of exasperation at the silence become palpable, that seemed to hold him motionless and impotent in its grip, with a feeling of bitter frustration, he thrust his foot sharply forth. A surprised dog jumped out of a deep sleep, and standing huddled together looked at him with dumb, questioning eyes. It was Fanny. She came slowly and laid a moist nose upon his knee. He let her stay there for a moment, making no move toward propitiation. Bewildered but forgiving, she drew her head slowly away, and with a stab of contrition Michael leaned over and hauled the clumsy dog up into his lap. Pushing her head into the crook of his elbow, she gave a long sigh and then was quiet . . .

A savage gust of wind tore at the windows behind Toby. He lifted his head and stared in troubled abstraction at the man and dog in the chair before him. "God, what a night!" he muttered. And then, "You asleep, Mike?"

"No."

Toby looked at Michael for a further moment, as though hardly seeing him or taking in the word he had said; then, once more going back to his book, appeared to read, absorbedly.

Interrupted, glad of a minute of respite, reaching as it were a spot of vacuum in the sweep of his rushing thoughts, for a space Michael's mind seemed to float free. His eyes had gone on over Toby's bent head to the window. He saw, without particularly caring, that the panes were covered halfway up with drifted snow. In his mind, his thoughts projecting his body into the blizzard, he felt the cold on his face . . . heard the wind howling through the pine trees . . . blowing the snow across a blind world . . .

Suddenly, sharply, he was pulled back into the room—and Toby. Some words had been spoken—lost now . . . floating somewhere out of reach . . .

"What?" he asked quickly, looking at his brother. Toby, lying back in his chair, sent him an oddly arrested glance . . . as though the abrupt chopping off of his sentence had snatched its meaning away. Then he gave a short laugh. "You ought to be reading this"—he indicated with a flick of his fingers the book in his lap. "It's all about—wool gathering, in one form or another."

"Sorry—" Michael got out a grunt of an answering laugh. "Go on, old man— What was it?"

"Just that I might get back to this—before the spring."

"What do you mean!" Born of quick remorse, the words sprang from Michael in swift, vehement denial. Toby had dropped his eyes and was turning the pages of

his book slowly over. "They want me, Mike," he said. "I . . . I've heard from them."

"When, Toby?" asked Michael, his voice subdued, for the pressure he put upon himself.

Toby lifted his eyes. "You don't really need me here, Mike," he said.

Steadily Michael returned his look. "How do you know that?" he asked in a curiously quiet voice. And he knew, then, that Toby must stay.

Toby started to speak, but bit off the words, and Michael saw, with wonder, a slow tide of color flood up into his thin face. "*Do* you, Mike?" he asked, as though with an effort.

"I want you—if that's the same thing," answered Michael evenly . . . "But not if you are—fed up," he ended simply.

"I'm not fed up— God, no!" burst out Toby. "Windy-hill— There's no place like it . . . But—three of us here, Mike—might get to be—a crowd. You know the old adage . . ." A reluctant smile flickered up in his face.

Michael laughed. Intense relief—and some irony—mingled to make of it a convincing thing to Toby . . . and the words that followed: "Don't be a damned ass, Tobe!"

For the moment Toby was caught. As though giving in, he shrugged his shoulders. Then, coming swiftly to some decision, he leaned forward and looked hard at his brother.

"Right, Mike— We'll let it rest there . . . for the moment."

His sudden and extreme gravity caught Michael up and made him say, "We'll let it rest—with *you*. —Only for as long as you want to stay,—no longer." Then lifting the trend of things to a lighter level: "But, man alive, it's all a mountain out of a molehill!"

"Some molehills are big enough to stumble over," came the answer in the same spirit—"while you're skirtin' the mountain . . ."

"Leave 'em both to the blizzard," suggested Michael with a sudden smile. "Come on to bed, Tobe."

But Toby stretched his shoulders back into the chair and thrust out his legs. "Think I'll finish this chapter, first," he said lazily.

"Wool gathering?" asked Michael casually, and depositing the spaniel carefully on the rug, got to his feet. Toby nodded, and opening his book plunged, apparently without more ado, into its contents.

Michael stood for a moment listening to the force of the wind, as it rushed snow-laden against the windows, and howled in the chimney—looking the while absently down at the man reading . . . sunk deep there in the old chair.

At last, drawing in a long breath he let it slowly out: "'Night, Tobe," he said, and swung about for the door.

"'Night—" was the answer.

Toby had not even lifted his eyes from the page before him.

Under the light from the horn lantern on the landing, Michael paused on a sharp spasm of indecision, strange to him, and new. His eyes going along the dim hall to Julie's room had caught sight of a strip of light beneath

her door. A tremendous need for her swept him—to explain everything—to see her, and hear some word in that stirring throaty voice. —“To what end?” Like the sucking backwash of a great wave, the stern scorn of the thought dragged back upon his desire, leaving him stranded in lonely sanity of thought and action. Deliberately and quietly he turned away, making for the low steps to his part of the house. But suddenly, halfway there, he stopped. —Toby was playing— Yes, in a lilting, hushed way all his own, he was playing that lullaby of Julie’s. And as Michael waited there in the dimly lighted hall, listening to the faint wail of the music, the wind outside, and the storm, seemed to come in and be a part of it, sweeping into the theme, to mingle strangely, but convincingly, fierceness with beauty. . . . From the passage behind him a sound reached his ears. Strung taut, he wheeled about . . . expecting—what?—

There was nothing—no one. Only Julie’s door was now ajar. A slanting shaft of light lay along the floor . . . No further sound. No Julie. —The music! That was it. Julie was listening to it. . . . With sudden and unreasoning jealousy, Michael wanted to be the one to play—to a door ajar . . . where, in the silence, Julie lay and listened. His foot already back on the lower step, the absurdity of the impulse stabbed him—filled him with a sort of scornful derision. “My God!” he muttered, “Where am I getting to?”

Steadily, with purpose, he walked forward along the hall to his room, went in, and shut the door carefully behind him.

A curious luminousness, hardly a light, was there in the

room, from the snow. He leaned his shoulder against the closed door, the glass of the door knob cold beneath his fingers. . . . What an extraordinary failure the whole day had been! Unaccountably, the words from last Sunday's psalm came to him: "For the good that I would, I do not; but the evil which I would not—" "It's *not* evil!" he found himself saying aloud—"Just damned cowardly." . . . He had taken his own personal feelings out on Julie up there at the gate,—a damned brute. He had found that fool letter of Potts's . . . and then had been afraid to hear what Julie was going to say . . . For one moment, irresistibly drawn, he had come perilously near to— Leaning there, her bewitching face so close, one shining braid fallen across his wrist— God! If he had fallen so low—had kissed her! He remembered, with a swift, hot thrust of shame, her instinctive withdrawal.—Could she have known? How? What must she have thought? How *could* he go on like this?

. . . Then down there just now with Toby . . . when he had spoken of leaving . . . after wishing him in limbo—his own brother . . . had he been at all convincing? He *must* convince the boy! . . . Because a rotten flame of jealousy had caught him, he had all but flown down and dragged Toby from the piano. Anger, and disgust, swept hotly over him—"Good God!" the words came harshly in his throat, hardly uttered,—“Can't you be a man, and stand up to it? What difference does it make, that you're in a hell of a hole? You needn't pull the world in after you, trying to get out.”

A dog scratched at the door. With a short laugh, Michael swung to open it. "Come in, girl," he said.

"Misery loves company. —Hell of a night, isn't it?" He watched the dog's dim bulk as she shook vigorously . . . felt a sprinkle of snow from her, cold on his hand. The music had ceased. No sound came now but the wail of the wind. Michael shut the door, and without a light got off his things. Throwing a window high to the storm, he tossed a heavy blanket over the dog on the foot of his bed, and crawled in himself. Stretched flat on his back, he lay with wide eyes, listening to the thunder of the wind in the chimney.

Chapter Nine

I

SOMETIME before dawn, worn out by its own fury, the wind had dropped. Julie, waking, had seen through a rent of cloud, beyond a dark arm of hemlock, the cold glitter of a star, and knew that the storm was over. Far away across the snow a cock had suddenly crowed. Turning on her side, feeling against her knees the friendly pressure of Tess's back, she had fallen into a deep and dreamless sleep.

She stood now before the geranium at the east window in the hall. In the sunlight that splashed through the deep reveal of the old window the beautiful single flowers seemed alive, like flame.

The green watering pot with a long spout stood empty at Julie's feet. One hand, crushing in it two dead leaves, rested on the sill before her, as she looked, with a tingling sense of delight, up the long slope of virgin snow beyond. It was too beautiful for words, the smooth, perfect sweep

of it. A puff of wind blew a cloud of fine snow from the branch of a pine tree. Julie watched it drift off, leaving one great bough more dark than its fellows; and leaning her shoulder against the side of the window, her thoughts, too, drifted off.

. . . There would be that same smooth, white covering over the dark springiness of hemlock branches—upon her father's grave . . . and her mother's. Curiously then, by a queer trick of memory, came the thought of her mother's hands working in the earth at the roots of some springing green plant in the garden . . . Long, beautifully made hands, dexterous and firm. And then, as it sometimes happened when she stood before a mirror, in a flash, seemingly part of herself, Julie saw her mother's mouth—quirking up at one corner in the beginning of a smile. She caught her breath in a sharp sigh, and the vision broke about her . . . The slope of hill came back. And on it, now, appeared a figure, swooping in a wide curve that sent spurts of snow spraying out on either side. It was Pip—that wiry length of liveness in dark blue woollen things, with his skimpy beret rakishly askew. She had entirely forgotten that it was Saturday.

She watched, fascinated, long enough to see another boy on skis swoop after. He fell with a wild plunge, and Julie knew that it was Micky—reckless young devil, who loved to go plunging about, taking shots at anything that came to hand—or foot! Pip had fetched up with a well-timed “Christie” beyond the pine trees, and was shouting to someone she could not see, who was evidently coming down the lane.

Julie opened the door. Some snow, clinging to the

outside, detached itself, and blowing past her knees fell with a plop on to the rug. The air sparkled, keen and frosty. Standing on the tail of a snow-plow, Toby was driving the chestnut farm horse along the drifted ruts of the lane. Waves of snow curled off the stubby blue colter of the plow. The rough mane of the big horse blew and flopped in the wind, as did the brim of Toby's old felt hat. Julie saw him cram it lower over his ears. His face was ruddy and hardened-looking by the cold. He called to Pip, and with a laugh pointed an arm at Micky, now only a length of ski slanting skyward and the dark blot of a body sprawled helpless: probably, with desperate laughter, thought Julie.

Pip saw her first. She was beginning to feel cold; and with a genial wave and shout to them all turned to go in for a coat.

"Hey!" sang out Toby; "hang on a minute!" He gave the reins he held to Pip, and hopping off the plow, plunged with a fair show of speed through the deep snow, across the space that intervened.

"Isn't it beyond belief, Julie?" he offered, as he stood on the doorstep, looking down at her. Then, with a sparkle of amusement: "Mike sent me plowin' down here to say—" he laughed and corrected himself—"to *ask*—if you wanted to come along over to the spot of your late disaster . . . to see if we can haul the old fliv' out of her grave. —How about it?—I don't even know where she is." Julie smiled slowly up at him. "Well, I do. I'm not likely to forget, Tobias." She sent a droll glance toward the oncoming plow, and Pip hooking a ride behind,—“On that?”

Toby loved her terribly just then . . . the sun shining on her ruddy hair, a mischievous glint in her green eyes . . . "Get on something," he urged.

"We'll all go skijoring," cut in Pip, bringing the old horse alongside with careless ease of precision.

Then, with a glance over his shoulder at Micky now struggling to an upright position, he gave a quick chuckle. "Mick's the damndest thing"; he looked with a grin of recollection at Julie. "He just tried a jump off the long ice house roof." His voice ran up into a burst of laughter . . . "Clean buried in a drift, he was—all but the top of one ski—and only lost a button from somewhere," he finished weakly, as he fished a handkerchief from the depths of a pocket and blew his nose.

Julie fled up the stairs for warm things.

In a bustle of importance Tess scrambled after.

2

When they drove the plow into the farmyard, young Tabs was hooking the final trace of the two gray farm horses hitched to a log sledge. Pip slid past the plow. "Where's Mr. Mike? Isn't he round, Tabs?"

The boy's head bobbed up from behind a gray's quarters. "Naw—don't think so," was the helpful answer, as he composedly caught and buckled the ends of the reins.

"Don't hurt yourself, thinkin', Tabs," jibed Micky, coming alongside. Then, whisking about toward the barn, he sent forth a lusty roar. "Oh—Mi-ike!"

For a minute Julie stood there on the tail of the plow. Toby had begun to take the horse out, offering no remark as to Mike's disappearance. Tabs, having accomplished his task, walked off to the barn.

"Well, I'll be blowed!" Pip gave a whistle. Then, a hand on one of the gray's reins, sent a comical look over his shoulder at Julie. "Chatty soul, ain't he?" he volunteered. . . . "Mi-ike!" came another roar from Micky. And from her point of vantage, over Pip and the sledge, Julie caught sight of a familiar felt hat and pair of wide shoulders moving along beyond the farther wall of the cow yard. She hopped off the plow. Toby was leading the big farm horse toward the barn, where Micky had disappeared.

Pip swung about—"Well timed, Mike!" he greeted cheerfully.

Michael sent back some good-natured retort to Pip and came steadily on toward Julie.

His hat was pulled down over the tips of his ears. One flap of a gray flannel collar had got outside his leather coat. With his shoulders hunched, his hands thrust deep in the pockets of his corduroy breeches, he came striding along through the snow—a terribly intriguing figure to the girl who waited. . . . Would she ever get over this fearful excitement that caught her so hopelessly unprotected and helpless? she wondered swiftly, as Michael, bringing forth a hand, slid it along a gray's nose and came to a stop before her.

"Awfully sorry, Jude," he said briefly, looking soberly down into her face. "After getting you up here, and all—" Still he looked at Julie, as though some further

thought had jostled the first aside. She saw the muscles working in his jaw and had time to think that he looked rather more gaunt than usual, before he was going on casually enough, half turned to Pip, "You saw the old gnome when you went past—?"

"Old fathead, with ear-tabs?"

"The very same," answered Michael in all gravity. "He chose to-day, of course—Saturday before Washington's Birthday—to plow his way up here at last and tackle that job in the hen house."

"The Carpenter said nothing but 'Cut us another slice','" murmured Pip to the ears of the off-horse. In a sort of relief, Julie laughed. Then: "Never mind, Mike," she said. "If you can't let old Ear-tabs wrastle things out alone—and of course you can't: he never would—I'll show Toby and the boys where 'X'—if nothing else, now—marks the spot, at the fork of the road . . ."

Micky emerged at that moment from the barn with a coil of rope. He dragged a chain through the snow, at his heels. Toby followed.

"Aren't you coming, Mike?" he asked.

"No—I can't," was the crisp answer. Michael turned to Julie. "Is the car in the way there at the fork?" he asked.

"I'm afraid it is, a bit, Mike," she said.

"Right— Want Chris, Toby?"

"Lord, no!" was the vehement answer. "Micky and I can *carry* the bus home, and Julie can go off for a drive with Pip, if she wants."

"Suits me, all right," observed Pip with a wicked wink at Julie, who responded with alacrity. Fetching down

the reins from where Tabs had tossed them, she stepped aboard the sledge.

"Come on, Toby," she said. Then looking at Michael with sudden mischief as though the bright idea had that moment flashed into her head, "Couldn't you *bring* the Carpenter . . . ?"

She hadn't meant to poke fun at Michael or his carpenter . . . She was simply taking a way out. But, being Julie, and seeing a curiously unresponsive look tighten Michael's face, she would not go back on her tracks. . . . Why couldn't he have laughed?

He had turned, as if oblivious of her remark, to make some half-teasing one to Micky. Julie, knowing a moment of hot misery, nevertheless gave a little mental shrug. Toby had dropped on to the end of the sledge beyond the ropes and chain. Standing to drive, Julie swung round with something of recklessness in a gesture to Michael—a sort of devil-may-care wave of her arm . . .

Michael made no response. Only, for a moment longer he watched Julie's upstanding figure on the sledge, as she drove the two big horses off down the hill. . . . "How little she knows . . ." he said at last, and turning abruptly away, walked back past the cow yard to the miserable hen house.

3

They had tugged with horses, chain and ropes. They had pushed with shoulders, sworn roundly and roared with laughter, trampling about in the drift—and only succeeded in moving the old car a few feet further into

the ditch, at the fork. The horses at last hitched back into the sledge, Pip heaved a sigh of relief and remarked that she'd be safe there, anyway, for the winter. Then, bursting into laughter that caught them all along: "I'm off," he said, reaching for the skis sticking in a drift beside his poles. "You can have a drive with Toby, Julie . . . Coming, Micky?—I'll show you that jump."

"Yep," grunted the latter as he struggled with a stiff strap.

The reins in her hands, Julie turned to the man standing in the snow beside the sledge. "Coming, Toby? I'll show you that— *Something*, anyway."

"Mimic!" Toby dropped on to the sledge. "Carry me back to old Virginny," he sang, crossing his legs tailor-fashion and raising amused eyes to Julie.

She nodded, and without more ado started the horses off along the road that climbed to Windyhill.

The snow was still almost unbroken, and badly drifted. The big horses plowed along with nodding heads to the clank and rattle of a whiffletree and some obscure creak underneath. Once a bough deposited a shower of snow on Julie's shoulder. She had almost forgotten the man crouched behind her, and hardly noticed where she went. . . . Why had she acted like that to Michael? Why, when she was with him, was she forever doing and saying things that were just opposite from all her thoughts of him? She seemed to get in deeper and deeper every hour . . . in love, and in trouble, that she was helpless to overcome or obviate. . . . How little Mike knew—How little!

"Where are you going, Julie?"

At the question springing up at her, Julie turned to find Toby standing close behind. She flashed him a sudden smile, humorous and thrilling. "Well, now you ask me—it looks as if we were turning in past the Challoners' . . . We can go on by my house and over the hill to the barn. Is that all right? 'I did forget, for a minute, Tobe,'" she confessed. "We just happened in here, really."

Toby laughed and held out a hand for the reins. Julie shook her head in smiling denial . . . And in that minute one of the runners met a hidden log . . . something that suddenly canted the sledge. Instinctively throwing out a hand to steady herself, Julie clutched at Toby's arm. He caught her hand in a grasp of surprising hardness. And for a second there came to the eyes Julie laughed into, something hot and reckless—and arresting. Then the sledge righted and slid forward on an even keel. Julie had let go—and so had Toby. "Bumpy!" he said with a short laugh. . . . "Never saw it," she was saying, while, in a flash of dismay, she knew that in five years Toby had forgotten—nothing!

He had dropped off the sledge and was plodding along in their tracks. He was whistling that wretched catching thing of Pip's. Julie was suddenly terribly sorry for Toby. . . . What had been going on in his head all this while? —Why had he come home? —How horribly tangled up things were! She, herself, was floundering, hopelessly caught in the very midst of it all . . . and might be the cause of great unhappiness between these brothers. . . . Because, she thought with swift irony, the wrong one loved her. . . . Why had she ever come to Windyhill . . . to break things up for them all? She

wished, with her whole heart, as she drove the big horses through the deep snow of the lane, that she had never left the old house by the brook. Never! And then came sharply the thought: Michael had given her the house, —her father's house! Oh! She lifted her head in a little desperate gesture.

"There's Jane!" observed Toby suddenly, from behind.

A few yards ahead, coming out into the snowy fields, the lane swung past the Challoners' tiny house with its huge barns and paddocks. Before the gate, with two terriers rollicking about her, Jane leaned on a snow shovel and watched them come. Serenely unself-conscious, not caring in the least, she had at the moment the aspect of an amiable thin scarecrow. Julie caught something flung out about a funeral procession. Then, leaning there on her shovel, the snow halfway to her knees, Jane waited their nearer approach with a quizzical grin on her weather-beaten, stable-boy's face.

"Do you wonder what we're up to?" laughed Julie, pulling up on a level with her.

Jane gave an inimitable hunch of her shoulders. "Where's Mike?" she asked. "Have you buried him? You both look as solemn as though you'd been to a funeral. —And why the sledge?"

"Why, indeed?" murmured Toby. "Speak to the lady, Julie. Have you forgotten your manners, child?"

"Well—" began Julie with that incalculable, to Toby, sudden twist into impishness, "It *was* a sort of funeral, Jane." She tilted her fur-capped head and Toby watched the beginning of that faint, secret smile he knew so well.

"What are you talking about, Jude?" Jane, ready

to laugh, was for the moment arrested. Toby, with a detached air, was fixing something at the back of the sledge. He gave a little bark of a laugh. Unwilling, almost, thought Jane.

"I saw it, with my own two eyes, Jane— Three great men, with horses,—trying to bury a poor old Flivver—in a ditch!"

At the expression on Jane's face, she broke into a throaty chuckle. "I'll tell you—really," she said. . . . "Are you going somewhere with that shovel?"

"Yes," said Jane, affably giving in, "I'd like a lift to the stables."

"Hop on," said Julie.

With Toby's help, Jane and the two Irish terriers scrambled aboard, and they started along the lane toward the barns, while to Jane's delight, in an amusing vein far removed from her true feelings on the subject, Julie proceeded to tell of her encounter with the blizzard—The abandonment of her car in the ditch at the fork, her struggle up the hill, to be met by a wild-eyed Michael, at the gate. "Poor man," she concluded, "I'd given him a mean half hour. He made me go to bed, and fed me on hot posset. —What *is* posset, Jane? Do you know?"

And Jane answering, because Julie had a way of catching up and sweeping another along with her in one of these amusing, fantastic turns of hers, wondered all the more, as she looked into the delicious whimsical face before her, how Toby could stand things— And was sure he couldn't. Reckless young devil— He ought to go away. . . .

Before the stable Julie pulled up the horses. Jane

dropped off into a waiting drift, to swing sharply back. "I clean forgot to tell you—" her face crinkled in an irresistibly merry grin at her lapse: "Pat's here!"

"Pat English?" rapped out Toby, delighted and incredulous.

"Pat—?" echoed Julie—"I thought he was in Paris—"

Smiling, Jane shook her head. "Gaunt as a winter tree, erratic as the weather, and funny as the devil—he's here! . . . Straying about somewhere on a pair of broken snowshoes." She waved them off with a chuckle and turned toward the stables.

4

The wild crab-apple tree at the bend in the lane made a delicate snow-topped arch over the width of unbroken snow beneath. Julie and Toby had to crouch low to pass. Toby, bobbing up too soon, knocked off a goodly mass of snow, that showered down over his head and shoulders and sifted coldly into his collar. He swore ruefully, and Julie laughed softly, wickedly.

It seemed, then, as though they had slipped through into a space of faery. High up in the trees, the wind soughed, and a drift of fine snow floated down from an evergreen. The brook was completely buried. From the heart of a snow-laden cedar a partridge drummed forth and made for the woods on the hill. Smooth snow . . . blue shadows of trees . . . another twist in the half obliterated lane, and there was the old gray house, crouching under the hill, stilly remote . . . snowed in. At the

end of the path, by the tall bare lilacs, a man stood solemnly looking up at the house, apparently lost in thought.

Julie caught Toby's arm in a swift grasp. "Don't say a word, Toby— He doesn't even hear us coming." Toby grinned appreciatively and nodded.

With jangling bells and creaking sledge, the big horses thumping along through the deep snow, they drew near. The man never moved.

Level with him, not ten feet away, Julie pulled up. Only then, as though noticing the lack of ringing bells, the man on snowshoes very slowly swung his huge frame to face them.

"Hello, Pat," said Julie, quiet and smiling.

In the thin curious face a pair of amazing yellow eyes returned, unperturbed, and with no surprise, a smile as quiet as Julie's . . . "Do you know, Linnet—" he had so far not even taken in Toby's presence—"that's not altogether canny." His face broke up suddenly in a smile, and wheeling his snowshoes about, he came clumping up beside the sledge and held out both hands. With one of Julie's in each of his, reins and all, he laughed up into her face, showing his big white teeth.

"I was standin' here, wishin' for you— How are you, Linnet? —And you, old Tobias Sheepskin? Thought *you* were in Australia." Toby laughed. . . . "Where's the Cock? —Think of you landin' the old Cock, Linnet!" He scrambled, snowshoes and all, on to the sledge beside Julie, and putting a hand on either of the girl's shoulders looked down from his gaunt height, with naïve approval, into her face. Then he nodded his head. "It's got to be," he said. "That's all there is to it."

Julie was looking up with understanding and delight, her eyes shining mistily. Toby watched without a word. Pat English was speaking—"I've come three-thousand miles for your face, Linnet," he said. "Thank God for the sight of it!"

Julie gave a sudden smile of pure happiness. Toby saw it sparkling there in her upturned face.

"You are just the same old Pat— Divinely crazy! What are you going to do with my face—now that—it's here?" she finished gaily.

"Oh, that smile! That secret, hopeless-to-catch smile! It's been haunting my days and driving me wild— I couldn't quite remember it." He threw back his head and laughed for joy—stretching his long arms heavenwards. Then suddenly dropping them, with a whimsical twist of his mouth, his yellow eyes gone off inscrutably to themselves: "I'm doing a figure of Woman—Annunciation—" he said, half to himself.

Toby had long ago taken the reins from Julie, and now, without breaking into this strange and erratic meeting of the two behind him—not asking whither—was driving the big horses slowly past the snow-laden trees of the orchard, up, up through the trackless snow glistening and blowing along the hill. He had thought he was entirely forgotten, but looking back found Pat English grinning at him over the top of Julie's little fur cap. "Where are we off to, Toby?" he asked with a swift, droll look downwards at the snowshoes he was lashed to.

"I thought—" said Toby, slow and wicked, "you were either very full—or—very empty. I'm moving on for Mike to decide and administer."

Pat English gave a great laugh. "I'm very drunk! Wouldn't you say so, Linnet? —My mind is whirling—teeming—*milling* with ideas . . ." (He had entirely forgotten Toby again, and was looking with sudden attentiveness down at Julie, now sitting clasping her hunched-up knees in the middle of the sledge). "This is the top one—red hot off the griddle: Rent me the house, Jude—Don't say 'no' *anything*—water, heat, light. There's the big room at the back of beyond . . . with a pump in the offing; and no doubt there's a log or two of wood and a candle. I must have it! There's no other place like it. . . . You, in it, before the fire . . . your madonna head uplifted . . . smiling your worst little never-get-caught-yet smile—and me, with a lump o' clay—" his eyes, intently dreaming, narrowed to golden slits—"and God's help—to catch it—forever!"

Julie's back was now turned to Toby. She was looking up at the big man half crouched on the end of the sledge. Toby saw her slowly, and without a word, nod her head. . . . What, in God's name, he asked himself, was Julie up to now?

5

"Good luck, Cock! Happy days!" Pat English held up a tall glass, and with a glint of raillery in his tawny eyes looked over the rim at Michael.

"Thanks, Pat— Here's luck to you!" They tipped their glasses and drank deep.

"Ah—!" Toby spoke from the doorway—"So Mike's

decision was:—Not full!" He came on in and threw a leg astride of the fire bench.

Pat English put down his glass with a chuckle. Then, looking at Michael, his bony face broke into swift laughter:

"Toby refers to this morning, Mike—" He shrugged a pair of gaunt shoulders. "I'm crazy enough, God knows—though not with drinkin'— More often for lack of it!"

Michael regarded him with a look of humorous expectancy. He brought a pipe out of a pocket and began to fill it. "Of *course* you're crazy. But I thought you were takin' it out on Paris. You never gave a bit of warning you were coming back."

Pat English tilted his dark head and looked sidewise at Michael.

"We're quits there, Cock! Who ever told *me* you'd gone off with my Linnet bird? —Where she's at the bottom of a thing, you see, one *doesn't* give a word o' warning. . . . I've come for her head—to carry it off on a charger—in clay," he finished, with a slow, happy smile into the heart of the fire.

From his end of the low bench, Toby sent a look at Michael. Standing with his back to the fire, the latter was apparently still absorbed in the process of filling his pipe to his liking, looking down as he pushed with strong fingers at the tobacco in the pipe bowl. Between the brothers, one knee resting on the bench, Pat English was staring into the fire, not heeding, in the least, that Michael had made no response to his remarks about Julie's head, in clay—on a charger. Toby saw the muscles working in

Michael's jaw, and knew, instinctively, that in a minute his head would come up, with that quick lift that was a part of Michael—and he would say something, more quietly, Toby suddenly realized, than he was *feeling*, about whatever it might be.

Ah—it was happening! A curious uneasiness stirred in Toby as he saw Michael lift his head to look at Pat English. He swung away and reached for a cigarette on the table beyond him, and, lighting it, heard Michael ask casually enough:

“What did Julie say, Pat?” (*Was it casual?—that little final inflection? Did it hold something of urgency?*)

The dark, ruffled head beyond Toby came up with a jerk. “Julie—say?” echoed Pat in a moment's blankness, pulled away from something seen in the fire— “Oh—” He laughed joyously . . . But before he could go on, a throaty voice broke in from beyond the door—“Ask *me*, Michael.”

The man half kneeling was on his feet in one ungainly motion, and facing the door. Standing there, her hand lightly resting on the lintel, a shadowy smile about her mouth, Julie was looking past the big sculptor, to Michael. . . . What was the matter with old Mike? thought Toby. The whole thing was somehow getting damned awkward— Wasn't it? Then Julie was coming on into the room; and Mike had said—(was he laughing, or was he not?): “Pat says he's going off with your head on a charger, Julie . . .” And Julie was laughing softly and saying—to Pat? “A perfect place for it!” Then Toby saw her turn and look, with curious sobering gentleness, at Michael: “Pat wants to take my house, Mike,” she said.

. . . "He wants to do my head . . . for an Annunciation", she finished simply, and a faint color crept up into her face. —God! thought Toby with sudden bitterness—What was Mike made of?

"That's why I'm not in Paris, Cock, you see," said Pat.

But Michael was looking intently at Julie, a question in his eyes he would not voice; and, for the second time that day, Toby saw Julie faintly, mutely, nod her head.

Michael gave an odd, short laugh.

"What's old Sherry goin' to say?"

Pat English twisted about to look at Michael. "What should Sherry have to say?"

"Only, that Julie has just said a flat 'no'—to a portrait" . . .

"Tough on Sherry— Wasn't it, Linnet?" said Pat English, rather gravely for him . . . "Why did ye do that?"

Toby saw a change come over Julie's face. Then she gave a low laugh, and, with a touch of mockery, asked—*"Must you know, Pat?"*

"No! I mustn't . . . Come and sing!"

"After waffles?" was the droll protest; "how can I?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," chuckled the big man, "but you always could—and you know it!" He thrust an arm through Julie's, and marched her over to the piano.

"You're a terrible man, Pat English," she said. "What do you want?"

"To watch your face while you sing—whatever you please," was the naïve answer.

"Sing that foolish song of Pip's," said Michael surprisingly, and turning, leisurely struck a match and lighted his pipe.

Toby gave it up— All of it! Swinging his leg over the end of the bench, he slewed about with his back to them and stared into the fire. . . . Why, of all things, had Michael asked Julie to sing that!

6

Julie, with Tess at her heels, walked slowly along the path beaten in the snow, that dropped over the hill to the Sheridans'.

The sun had gone down behind the hemlocks beyond the river. The big trees stood out darkly against a strip of clear green sky. Above, a line of cloud glowed faintly along the edge.

She had come forth in a mood of reckless unhappiness, but the sheer breath-taking beauty of the snowy world had caught her up into a moment of sharp ecstasy, that was like the relief of tears. Her eyes dropped from the clear sky above the trees to the old house crouched there in a fold of the hill. One light shone out, like a golden eye, and dimly, stilly, against the west, smoke was rising from a wide chimney. How beautiful and serene it was! that snowy hillside, and the dark great trees cutting into the sky. "Oh—" whispered Julie suddenly, the word caught back sharply on a sob . . . She had been like one possessed of a devil, all the day long . . . Saying things, doing things, in a sort of blind revolt against life . . . fighting her love for Michael, until, for very anguish, she could have cried aloud, and she had left them there, Josh and Pat and Toby—and Michael. With some offhand word

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. . . something she had not meant, and did not now even remember, she had come away . . . out into the cold hush of luminous snow under an apple-green sky.

Thank God she could still feel it all! stabbing through the hopeless farce of what the days had come to be . . . acting, acting, acting. Why, oh, why couldn't things have stayed simple and familiar as in the beginning, with Mike as he had always been? Not that that had been too easy; but she had at least gone forward with her eyes open, unafraid. . . . Now it was as though she walked in the dark . . . a dark filled with a confusion of voices which she could not understand. . . . Something had happened . . . she did not know Michael now. She was blindly feeling her way— Where? . . . Things hurt, unbearably, and made her angry that they could. . . . What must she be like—if there were anyone to notice—

Toby! The sudden thought of Toby brought her to an abrupt stop there on the snowy hillside:—What must Toby think? That he *did* think—to her sorrow she now knew . . . Anyone could see that Michael did not love her. They were not living together. And Toby— She had come blundering into Windyhill, on a ghastly mistake . . . ruining Michael's peace, and doing a cruel thing to Michael's brother. . . .

And then—old Pat had come! Julie gave a little catch of ironic laughter. No wonder she had, metaphorically, thrown herself upon his neck! in a sort of reckless abandon of relief at the naturalness of him—not having to act: just being herself. It was good to see Pat. To hear his wild, inconsequent, enthusiastic nonsense. To be treated like a human being again. And so she had said he could have

her house—and her head, too—never stopping to think of what Michael might think. —What *did* he think? . . . Only that she had treated Sherry rather shabbily. And hadn't she, really? from their point of view— How could she explain to Mike? She couldn't—she couldn't even say the simplest of things. . . . She had felt that to allow Michael to have her portrait painted would be for her, somehow, not an act of faith toward all the Cochrane women who had gone before. How could she tell that to Michael? And how to Sherry?

Tess, plunging up to her through the snow, brought Julie back with a start. The day was dying. The west had faded to a paler green. There, now, the evening star burned bright above the river. She was standing on the slope before the Sheridans' house, and a shaft of light from the window of the end room lay in a blurred patch, faintly gold, upon the snow at her feet. There was the heartening flicker of a fire within. . . . Perhaps she could explain—a little, to Sherry. He understood things. He had asked her, that day . . . Yes, she would go—now.

With Tess plowing along in her wake, she crossed the snowy driveway and opened the old green door. . . .

"Hello," said Pip— "See what I got here?" He was sitting cross-legged in the middle of the hall rug, holding against a tweed shoulder an absurdly fat, chocolate-colored puppy. All doubled up, her back supported by the crook of Pip's arm, she looked mildly up at Julie out of a pair of amber eyes. Tess had promptly seated herself on the extreme edge of the rug and was looking with comical alarm at the phenomenon there before her.

Julie gave a chuckle at the sight. Pip made one chuckle.

And she grasped just then, as a blessed relief, at any of the simple nonsense of life.

"I'm teachin' her to talk—" Pip shot a droll sidelong glance over the puppy's head at Julie—"French verbs." At the glint in Julie's eyes he tipped his head and laid a cheek against the puppy's nose. "She's stuck, at the moment," he confided with a grin.

"Give her to me, Pip. She's too young for that." Julie's mouth twitched—and then, like children, they were laughing together. Pip got to his feet and deposited the month-old puppy in Julie's arms. "You could take her pretty soon, now, I think," he said. She held the warm little body against her cheek, half draped over her shoulder, like a baby. Pip stood a moment looking at her with young speculative eyes: "I like your face, Julie," he said at last with simple frankness—"it's thin and lovely."

"Do you, Pip?" she answered, smiling. And then: "Is your mother here?"

"No she's not. She walked over with the others to Uncle David's, for tea. I've got to get 'em now. Do you want to keep Pippin—or are you comin' too? —Dad's here, of course . . . nosin' around for tea. Do you want some?" Then, with his face lighting, not waiting for an answer, "He's doin' a splendid thing, Julie. The big beech tree, bare and silvery, with the old rosy brick wall and the shed . . . all slapped on wet and wonderful in water colors . . . with a great sweep of snow—real snow, and a most glorious windy sky . . . Nip up, if you can find him," he suggested, "and take a look at it."

"I'd love to, Pip," she answered gravely. The boy had

begun, absently, kneeling before her on the rug, to pull down the zippers on her overshoes. She let him take them off. Then, with the puppy still snuggled against her neck, she sent him a quick, warming smile of thanks, and turning away, made slowly for the room where she had seen the shimmer of a fire.

The lamp was lighted on the gate-legged table by Naomi's chair. It shone on an old blue bowl filled with Roman anemones. In the wide fireplace the ends of a mammoth log glowed and flickered where it had burned through and fallen apart. The faint tang of wood smoke was there . . . and the cool fragrance of some flower she did not see . . . On one end of the hearth, in the shadow, a dog slept. It was the old beagle, Mowgli. He raised a graying muzzle, thumped the floor with his tail, and dropped back into the shadow, and silence.

Sherry was not there. Beyond the fire bench, on a low table, the kettle simmered and hissed. Someone had used a cup and put it down on the other end of the bench beside an ashtray and screwed-out cigarette. That wouldn't be Pip. Sherry must have had his tea and gone off somewhere, thought Julie. . . .

She had come instinctively to stand before the fire. And seeing that a smouldering end of log had rolled forward on the ashes, reached with her free hand for the tongs (she still held the puppy tucked against her shoulder) and gave the fire a dexterous prod. Tess, having gone up and held an ingratiating and one-sided conversation with old Mowgli, subsided gingerly, because rather wetly, on to the hearth, and gazed solemnly into the new little flames that Julie's efforts had evoked. The girl helped herself

absently to a cigarette. She lighted it slowly, her eyes on the tiny flames. Then tossing the match into the fire, she dropped into Naomi's chair.

"Oh—" She gave a long sigh. How peaceful it was—this old room of the Sheridans'. How like them, too. For a moment, thankful just not to have to think or speak, she lay back, with little Pippin warmly cuddled against her shoulder and neck, and watched the thin lines of smoke waver and rise from the end of her cigarette. . . . Someone opened the door behind her and came in from the brickway.

"That you, Sherry?" Julie spoke without moving. "I'd nearly fallen asleep in the mother bear's chair."

It *was* Sherry. He came up to the fire, and dropping a felt hat on to the bench looked humorously down at the girl sunk in the depths of his wife's chair. "They're all off, somewhere, with Naomi." He smiled: "I don't really know where— Do you?"

Julie nodded her head and smiled back. "I saw Pip. He was sitting on the rug in the hall with this," she stroked the sleeping small thing in her arms and her smile deepened at the recollection—"teaching her French verbs . . . Said she was just stuck— Pip's fascinating to me, Sherry. . . . He's gone over to Uncle David's for Naomi and the boys. They went there for tea, he informed me."

"Oh—" laughed Sherry, and swinging a long leg over the bench sat twisted about, facing Julie.

"Been working all day— Gloriously—" he said, taking out his pipe. "It got dark suddenly, the way it does—and I went out The west's a pale, clear green, Julie," he went on happily—"as green as your long, wicked eyes

. . . Trees dark on it—snow curiously luminous . . . And God, how still! I heard a dog bark somewhere, and the sound actually snapped like a whip.”

“Yes, Sherry— I saw it . . . I know.”

“You’re one of the few people who do, Julie,” he told her. And then, with a change: “I hear Pat English has turned up at the Challoners’. I thought he was in Paris for the winter, working on some project.”

“Sherry—” said Julie on a swift impulse to confess, “I wonder if I can explain something . . . even a little bit. It has to do with Pat English. That is, with his coming here . . .” The nice eyes turned upon her, behind their steel-rimmed spectacles, seemed, with a sort of grave humor, to invite whatever she might have to say. “Try it, Julie,” was the cheerful suggestion.

The puppy had begun to rove about and try to get down over the arm of the chair. “Do you let her?” Julie sent Sherry an amused glance of interrogation, and saw his eyes twinkle. “*I* probably would,” he confessed;—“but give her to me.” Smiling, Julie relinquished the puppy and watched Sherry go off with the small thing in the crook of his arm. Tess came and thrust a cold nose into her hand. Waiting there, Julie wondered how to begin, with what she felt she owed Sherry. If she could ever, now, speak the real truth—without having to turn and twist and think! She wasn’t used to going that way at life. She didn’t know how . . . And then Sherry had come in again, and was standing with his back to the fire, soberly smoking his pipe. It was like him, she thought with gratitude, not to remind her where they had broken off.

“Sherry—” she said, suddenly making up her mind,

"the thing Pat English is doing—or has been, in Paris—is a figure of Annunciation—" The man addressed regarded her with quizzical eyes over the bowl of his pipe. "Pat got thinking, over there, that some tilt of my head, or slant of—oh, only heaven, or a sculptor, knows what!—were necessary to him for the head of his Annunciation. . . ."

"Not only a sculptor, Julie," Sherry interrupted, calmly amused.

"Listen to me, Sherry," Julie felt she must get on with this thing. "When you told me that Mike wanted you to paint my portrait, and you asked me to let you, I said no. . . . When Pat English told me he had come from Paris to put my head into clay— I'm going to let him, Sherry. I'm going to let him have my house, too—for a month."

"Naturally," said Ambrose Sheridan.

"Oh, Sherry," Julie felt horribly impotent—"it's *not* natural—and you know it. But it's different. This head won't have to be about at Windyhill . . . I hated to say no to you, Sherry . . . but I just couldn't have a picture of me hanging at Windyhill— I—" She had blundered into the wrong road, and she knew it. For once, Sherry was not helping in the least . . .

"Why not, Julie?" he asked simply.

She shook her head slowly . . . at her own futility. She *could* not be caught! Getting to her feet, she went and stood beside Ambrose Sheridan, and looking down into the fire that had leaped into new life, she spoke quietly. "I thought I could explain to you, Sherry. But I've slipped into a blind alley." She turned her head to find his eyes soberly upon her, and impulsively laid a hand upon his

arm. "You'll just have to let me out, Sherry, the way I came in."

"Of course, Julie," Sherry was saying without even looking at her. He leaned and tapped out his pipe on a log, and straightening up, spoke casually.

"You never had your tea, woman. Let's drink some, now."

Julie found herself smiling into his thin face. "You're terribly nice, Sherry," she said. "I must go back—to Windyhill."

In the hall, regardless of amused protestations on her part, Sherry put her overshoes on for her.

"I think I'll go along with you, Julie," he announced.

"Please not, Sherry," she said. "I—I'd rather. . . . I'm going out the way you just came in—by the brickway."

"Right—" Sherry laughed, taking everything for granted. "Go your stubborn way." He went with her, back through the room they had just left, and opened the door.

"Don't fall over the skis," he cautioned as Julie stood for a moment under the flat arch of the old brickway, her figure silhouetted against the twilit snow. "The things are all along the wall there . . . And don't forget to look at Venus. She's as big and brilliant as a fire balloon."

"I won't, Sherry. Good-night." Julie stepped out into a world of luminous snow.

7

Heedless of the still cold that wrapped him about, Ambrose Sheridan lingered for a further moment after Julie had gone, looking out under the shallow archway

to the sweep of snow that dipped to the river . . . up to the dark tracery of trees against a sky of pale, translucent gold. So deep was the hush of the winter twilight that he could hear the faint murmur of the big pine at the river's edge. For one brief, perfect moment, taken out of himself, he was lifted on a wave of indescribably deep joy . . . He felt, with a strange poignancy, all the love and pity and sorrow of the world . . . stirring within him to the beat of the earth's great heart. . . . Out of it came the swift thought of Julie—that she was game and fine . . . and very unhappy . . . Why?

“. . . Well, Sherry, old man, are you making a bid for the flu?”

He swung around, to see an amused Michael regarding him from the middle of the room. With a laugh, he came in and shut the door. “I never heard you, Mike,” he said.

“My old hobnails are guilty . . . Bares and squares, on the rugs—’member, Sherry . . . when you just couldn’t touch bare floor?”

Sherry nodded.

“I thought I might find Julie here,” said Michael, as he walked over to the fire, where Fanny was already ensconced near a plate of bread-and-butter that stood on the tea tray.

“Well, she was—but you’d have to run like a quail, to catch her at your own door. I don’t know why you didn’t meet her.”

“I came by the road, from the barns. . . . Julie got fed up with so many men, I guess— Josh and Pat English were there, and Johnny Dick. She slipped out without a word. . . . I came along as soon as I could shake ’em,” he explained simply.

"Too bad," offered Sherry cheerfully. —"Have a drink?"

"No, thanks." Michael was lighting a cigarette. Leaning on the back of the chair in which he had found Julie, Sherry looked keenly at the half-averted face before him. His eyes, trained to see things—curves and angles, lights and shadows . . . all the subtilities and fine planes that go to make up a human face—noted that Michael's, bent over catching the flare of a match, was more deeply lined, more gaunt than ever. —A grand, strong head! . . . It was showing strain. —Why?

Then, with a quick lift, Michael's head came up, and their eyes met.

"How's Pat?" Sherry asked him. "Julie has been telling me that he has come head hunting." . . .

Michael was looking at him oddly out of those remarkable eyes of his. "Sorry about the portrait, Sherry," he said slowly, apparently disregarding all reference to Pat English.

"That's all right, Mike . . . so am I . . . Julie told me . . . She's in better hands than mine, old man. Frankly, I envy Pat English. He's a very great sculptor, Michael. —That's not why I envy him, though."

Suddenly to Sherry came the disturbing thought of that letter he had given to Julie on the day when, meeting her at the garden gate with her arms full of hemlock branches, he had gone back with her to Windyhill, ostensibly to drink tea—but with the real purpose of proposing that he paint her portrait . . . Of his coming back into the hall, to ask about the little bronze filly on Michael's desk—Pat's—to have Julie turn upon him a pair of startled, almost stricken eyes, in a white face, as she crumpled the letter slowly into

a ball in her hand . . . Her words, at his question of quick concern: "It's—just an explanation, Sherry—that's all." . . . As it flashed by him again, now, words sprang spontaneously to his lips:

"Mike, old man,—the day you and Toby were off in Vermont, when I went to ask Julie about doing her portrait, I took her a letter that had got here by mistake. . . . She was rather badly knocked up by that letter, Mike. Naturally, I don't want to pry into anything of Julie's—But I hope it wasn't bad news. She's so damned plucky about things. . . . All she said to me, when I asked her, was: 'It's just an explanation, Sherry—that's all.' —Pretty stiff explanation to make her look the way she did then! . . . I've thought about it a lot."

He saw a queer slow smile twist Michael's lips. "An explanation . . ." he was echoing, looking at Sherry as though he did not see him. Then, his eyes focussing suddenly upon him, he laughed shortly, unhappily. "No—" he said, as if just then aware that a question had been asked him; he shook his head. "Not bad news—as such, Sherry: a rather stupid slip—that's all." Then deliberately changing the subject: "Where's Naomi? I've got to get back."

"Tea at Uncle David's," Sherry told him.

"Well—" Michael gave a brief, disarming smile, "as old Joe says: 'Tell her I was askin' for her' . . . 'Night, Sherry . . . Julie and I have kept you fairly busy." He tossed his cigarette into the fire and swept his hat up from the bench. "Come on, Fanny," he said, and abruptly made for the door into the brickway.

Sherry straightened slowly up and followed him. "I'll

give your message to my old woman," he said. And then, from the doorway, to the dim figure outside: "Don't get mixed up with the skis— There's a crop of 'em, pleached, along the wall."

Michael's laugh came back to him, as he swung out into the world of snow and stars.

. . . "What, in God's name, are you up to—you two?" whispered Sherry in bewilderment, as he stared at Michael's retreating figure, huge and dim in the cold dusk.

. . . "They're both of 'em unhappy as the devil, Naomi!" Standing before the fire in their bedroom, Ambrose Sheridan watched his wife sitting at her dressing table, brushing her waving soft hair. At the subdued vehemence of his words Naomi put down her brush and slowly turned to face him.

"More so, Sherry?" she asked.

"Well, darling—" he was looking soberly at her: "Pat English may turn out to be a sort of bull in a china shop. Quite innocently, but with the same devastating effect upon the china. . . . It's a great pity old Toby picked this winter to come back to Windyhill. . . . Having come—why in hell does he stay, Naomi?"

"Michael asked him to, Sherry," she answered with some truth and less conviction.

"Perhaps he did— But sometimes men do damned stupid things. . . ."

A smile that was whimsical, faintly wistful, crept into Naomi's eyes. She got up and went to the man before the fire. Putting her hands on his shoulders, she looked up into his face.

"Would it do a bit of good, dearest, if I spoke to brother Toby?" she asked simply.

"King Canute . . . ?" He smiled down into her eyes, loving her deeply . . . "What do you think?"

". . . That the tide *is* rising," she said, and drew his head slowly down to hers.

Chapter Ten

I

AFTER the night when Venus had hung like a fire balloon in a sea of clear, green sky above the river—a thaw had come. For a week the elements ran the gamut of all ways devised to rid the earth of snow and ice. In gray and penetrating damp the eaves dripped dishearteningly, and a foggy mist rose above the pools of snow water in the hollows. Then a watery sunshine gleamed mistily for a morning on spots of winter rye, incredibly green against the snow that still clung on. That night, on a wind from the west, came a drenching, spring-like rain; and in the morning, sailing behind droves of enormous fleecy clouds, the sun burst forth ever and again into patches of rainwashed blue. It shone down on a wet and sparkling world, where every rut ran rivulets; where pools were ruffled and hemlock branches, freed of their snowy burden, blew and sprang in the boisterous wind; where a brave, tiny company of snowdrops had pushed up, close to the wall, be-

neath the window of the library at Windyhill. Julie had waked to hear a phoebe singing in the hemlock tree. . . . It was ridiculous, and thrilling, and altogether *like* February—fooling the earth into thinking, for one ecstatic moment, that spring had come.

Julie stood on the doorstep, her face lifted to the fresh, earthy wind. Rain-washed and almost green, the hill swept up to the trees at the top, that thrust a tangle of dark branches against great rolls of pearly cloud. . . . In three days March would be there—bringing Pat English back from South Carolina, where he had gone for a week of hunting, and to model a famous hound for an old Colonel whose straight-riding, fox-hunting days were over. He would come, with some clay, and those extraordinary eyes of his that delved into things in their curiously impersonal way . . . He would go into her father's house—now hers—and would turn that lump of inert clay into the semblance of a human face, with a spark of divine fire that could make it hold the knowledge of Annunciation. *Her* face! —What irony! thought Julie, and laughed with a touch more of reckless misery . . .

On the surface, things went on apparently just as usual at Windyhill. No casual observer could have told that it was not by chance that Michael never, now, saw Julie alone . . . nor that Julie found ever a way of avoiding such contingency for herself and Toby.

They were going, that night, to Uncle David's,—all of them—to celebrate Toby's birthday. Uncle David, splendid old spartan, disregarding with fine equanimity what each added year might do to encroach upon the preserves of his own allotted span, was never happier than when observing

some other's birthday. And to-day Toby was thirty-four. . . .

At this point in Julie's thoughts the sun ducked behind a great, wind-driven cloud. She watched, in troubled abstraction, the shadows that roved over the hill—up to the greenness of the winter rye, dimming momentarily the gleam of white at the top, that was the last of the snow to linger, in a thin line, along the north side of the wall. Tess, having done with nosing about the winter covering of a flower bed, came trotting up and sat down close at Julie's feet. The little act of devotion prodded through the girl's absorption. She looked down with a rueful laugh at the stolid small back presented to her. "Seems to be our lot to stop by, these days, Tess," she observed. Then, her eyes caught by the snowdrops along the wall under the window, she gave a gasp of delight. "You darlings!" she whispered, and leaned swiftly to look more closely. How could such frail, perishable petals do such brave things?—Regardless of snow and sleet, with such utter trust, to come poking up through the brown mold . . . The ten or twelve tiny down-dropped heads seemed to be keeping up a faint fairy bobbing in the gusty wind. . . . They would be out, in the sheltered corner by the big bush of box . . . at the house over the hill! . . . A freed brook would be rushing and gurgling over the boulders beneath the hemlock . . . swirling stilly into its pool below the foot-bridge . . .

Yes, there they were! A patch of white and green, wet and fresh and adorable, at the foot of the old box bush; and the grass, where the snow had lain, wet after the

drenching rain of the night, was faintly green against the house. How could these things happen, in February? Julie crouched beside the snowdrops and lifted away some sodden leaves, bringing to light three more pale little sprouts.

Straightening up, she stood looking down the pathway between the covered box, past the tall bare branches of the lilacs at the end. The sun sailed out from behind a cloud and glistened for a moment on the wet flags. A pool of rain water, in a hollowed flag halfway down the walk, caught the flicker of gold on its wind-ruffled surface. —How fragrant it was—of wet earth, and budding things—this big, clean wind, blowing over the country she loved! Was that the brook? that hollow chuckle? It must be. . . . Oh, God, she loved it! . . . and she was very unhappy . . . and it hurt . . .

She turned suddenly away and went up to the old green door. Fitting the heavy key into the lock, she knew its creaking twist beneath her fingers. She lifted the latch and went in.

Leaving the door wide to the freshness of the morning, she crossed the hall to a narrow door of two deep panels tucked in the sheathing to the left of the fireplace. Her hand on the latch, Julie sent an involuntary look toward the hearth: those smooth, square tiles, sunk into dips and hollows. And then for a moment, forgetting her mission—Pat English, Michael, all the present—a wave of terrible homesick loneliness swept her . . . There was the squat red footstool at the other end of the hearth, with its familiar gentle list to one side . . . the pine wood box, with panels, against the smoky old sheathing beyond . . . the ladder-

back chair with arms, the black paint worn off where many hands had rested, the wood become smooth as satin . . . It was turned half away from the fire . . . as though someone—ah, who but her father?—had only just got up and gone out to the brook—the orchard. . . . Oh—the poignant loneliness of living here without her father had somehow been more bearable, because understandable and real, than the loneliness of living with someone you loved—who did not love you. . . . Why had she done this thing?—Why had Michael asked her to? . . . And now even this old house she loved, she owed to Michael . . . through what he had done for her father. And it seemed, after all, that she had nothing to give him in return. . . . In some subtle way, she was only hurting him. What had she done? What had come to Michael, to so hurt and change him? . . . Perhaps after Pat English went away—Perhaps it were for the best that Michael had made hers this house that faced the brook and the hill climbing to meet the sky. She lifted her head, and turning looked out through the open doorway. A branch of hemlock thrusting darkly across a sweep of hill . . . a patch of windswept blue . . . one towering cloud,—these things, changing as God bid them with the sun's way and the moon's, were yet enduring, and, while she had eyes to see and ears to hear, could bring to her heart a quickening stir of swift, sharp joy . . . The freshness of wet woods after rain . . . white violets in the spring, and cool fragrance of apple blossoms . . . dewy fields at dusk, and dawn climbing over the hill . . . the flicker of moonlight in tall summer trees . . . the murmur of running water . . . a bird's waking to sing . . . Julie stirred now and caught

her breath sharply . . . "Take care of to-day." She was whispering some words of her father's. With a smile that was ruefully aware of her moment's weakness, she turned back to the work at hand: that of preparing the old house to receive once more under the shelter of its roof that tawny-eyed boy who had gone away—to come again, a famous sculptor.

2

No wonder, she thought, as she stood at one end of the long, low room, that Pat English should want, of all places on earth, to work in this particular one.

The sheathing, long ago painted old Indian red, had dimmed and worn with time to an indescribably dusky warmth. The wide boards of the floor, unpainted, but waxed and trodden to a depth of ruddy brown, gave further feeling of warmth and color. In the great fireplace, where Julie could stand and look up to a patch of sky, in her great-grandmother Byrd's day, cooking had been done in iron kettles upon those cranes, bread baked, and turkeys roasted, in the brick ovens at either side . . . She remembered her grandmother telling her stories in this old room . . . of *her* great-grandfather, another Julian Byrd, who, on that long-ago 18th of April, had caught the word flung from the rider who galloped through a sleeping spring countryside . . . and snatching down, from where it still hung to-day, on its nail above the fireplace, his flintlock and powder-horn, had hustled a handful of sleep-befogged farm hands forth into a night that was to make history . . . Stories of her own time, of her older

brother, Jonathan Byrd, leaving this same house at the call from Abraham Lincoln . . . of the battles of Bull Run and Antietam . . . of the flag she had helped to make, and the lint she had scraped . . . and of the day her brother Jonathan had come back a captain, but with the dark blue sleeve of his uniform, where his left arm should have been, pinned upon his shoulder. Julie's eyes went now involuntarily to the deep wing chair at the corner of the hearth, where once had sat that little upright figure, her eyes undimmed, and still intrepid, for all their eighty years,—eyes as green as those of the child who listened, absorbed, on a three-legged stool at her knee, telling in simple, forceful words of her far-off childhood—of history in the making. . . . And now, of all the Byrds, only Julie and her father's older sister were left . . . gay, whimsical, lovely Aunt Anne, who had married Tom Dulaney and gone to Maryland, to that old beautiful place on the Eastern Shore. She lived there still, with Paul, her only son. Humorous, fox-hunting Tom Dulaney had been dead for fifteen years.

As she stood there for a further moment, her mind filled with vivid, happy pictures of the past, Julie's eyes traveled lovingly about the room. To the west, two deepest windows—the old thin glass all swirls and bubbles—faintly distorted through their small panes glimpses of the orchard and pine-clad hill. There, too, a door (it was made of two layers of oak, one planked across, one up and down, and had still the old wooden latch and leather latch-string that had been the delight of Julie's childhood) opened on to a bricked jog between the end of the house and the line of sheds built out at right angles to the house, making

a protection to the north. At the corner of the woodshed, almost against its mossy gray roof, leaned the first of the three seckel pear trees. Julie's eyes came back from the wet slope of roof and the twisted pear tree, and, wistful with remembering, went slowly about the room . . . It was so unspoiled. Built in 1704, by Christopher Byrd, the great-grandfather of that Julian who had heard the cry of Paul Revere and the clatter of his hard-ridden horse's hoofs—having known the vicissitudes of chance and change through more than two centuries—it stood, now, miraculously unharmed. . . . Julie's eyes rested for a moment on a sturdy, crude candlestand that had belonged to that Christopher of long ago . . . The chair that had been her father's, the comb-back Windsor rocking-chair, painted a dull green, that had been her mother's . . . the copper warming-pan with an iron handle that stood beyond the brick ovens, against the wall . . . the finely wrought flower-wreathed sampler marked 'J. M. B.' with the date, 1774, in faded, dim blue numerals, that hung above it on the wall . . . the pewter, of once daily use, on the shelves of the dresser at the end of the room . . . the tall clock in a pine frame (with a bull's-eye of greenish glass in the front panel) that could still tick out the slow passing of time . . . the deep blue Staffordshire plates standing along the back of the narrow shelf above the fireplace, the two old purple rum glasses, and the flat saucer-candlestick of brass, with a long handle, that always stood at the end,—all—all of these old things had belonged . . .

Julie's eyes dwelt for a moment on the door at the end of the room, to the left of the tall clock in the corner,—Pat's room. The minute kitchen bedroom of long ago. She

came back with an uncomfortable jolt to the present. —Would Pat English find it a room light enough to work in?—this old-time kitchen, with its low ceiling, and two great smoke-darkened beams? Then she gave a rueful laugh—at herself, for holding any such doubt. Pat knew these things—for himself. For six years, the room beyond that door had been his. He had slept there, for months at a time. Since, at the age of sixteen, his dark hair standing fiercely awry, his golden cats' eyes struggling, with a savage but pitiful blind of hardness, to suppress the glitter of tears and to ward off any sign of sympathy that might be proffered, he had come here straight from his father's grave—an orphan—to his dead father's oldest friend, Julian Byrd.

. . . And here he was, after nearly fifteen years (Julie had not seen him for five), a sculptor, acknowledged by two continents; but with his dark hair still awry, his golden eyes still ablaze—and, oh, how like him!—to catch a smile, a thing as fleeting, as ephemeral as smoke, and imprison it in clay—had come three thousand miles!

Tess suddenly barked,—a foolish little sharp bark. —Who was that stomping across the hall? Julie swung about to find Jane Challoner surveying her, with quizzical amusement, from the doorway.

“Come in, Jane,” she invited with a laugh. “I hope you've got a cigarette on you?”

With a throaty chuckle, Jane plunged her hand into a capacious pocket and tossed a package to Julie. “Matches are in it,” she said, and coming into the room, walked over to the fireplace and took down from the shelf above, a

small figure in bronze of an Irish terrier with a rakish cocked head. Still holding it, she sent an inimitable glance at Julie.

"My fingers itch to possess this, every time I see it! Wasn't it the first thing Pat ever had cast—for your father?"

Julie nodded. "He never did anything better, of a dog, either," she observed. "Do you remember Rufus?"

Jane dropped her voice and pulled in her chin. "Do I remember Rufus! . . . Do I remember the first fox's brush I ever got! —Of course I do!" She put the little figure back and turned swiftly on Julie who had sunk down into the wide reveal of the window.

"What's this about Pat coming here to do your head for some extraordinary figure he's come a cropper over in Paris? . . . Is there any truth in it, or is it just one of Pat's fabulous jokes?"

Julie was looking whimsically at the woman before the hearth. She took off her hat and leaned her head against the old inside shutter. "It may be a joke,—one of Pat's huge ones," she said serenely—"to do such a thing. But it's true that he's going to."

"I think you both must be perfectly cracked!" Jane launched the words with entertaining vehemence. "The clay will be, anyway, with the cold—" She looked about her as though the cold had actually become palpable.

Julie smiled, and took a pull at her cigarette. "Go on, Jane," she encouraged. With a half laugh and a shrug of her thin shoulders, Jane did. "You'll get pneumonia, and die young! —Perhaps, if he hurries, Pat can just manage to catch your Mona Lisa smile, first, and so perpetuate it

and his name— Oh, my God—” she finished, her pale eyes fixed in droll resignation on Julie, “what crazy creatures artist people are!—and how amusing!”

“Here are your cigarettes,” was Julie’s answer to this outburst, as she tossed the package across to its owner. “You had better have one while I tell you something sensible to comfort you. . . . When I come here to sit—or stand, as the case may be—it won’t—be—cold. Any more than Windyhill, or your house. So—eliminate the pneumonia, Jane . . . though I don’t say, for a moment, that I’m not cracked . . . In fact, I’m very sure I am.”

But above Julie’s words Jane’s sharper ears had caught a sound. She sent a grin of acknowledged defeat to the girl at the window, and moving to the door looked out into the hall.

“Hello, Mike!” she said suddenly. “Come in and settle an argument.” There came the patter of paws across the bare floor beyond Jane, and Fanny, nosing her way past that thin figure in tweeds, bounded into the room and up to Julie.

“. . . The door was open . . . and I wondered—” came Michael’s voice, from the hall. And then: “Where’s Julie?”

Sitting there on the wide ledge of the window, Julie felt somehow absurdly trapped. . . . What was Jane going to say?

3

“Here she is!” Jane drew aside as Michael came up, and Julie saw his big shoulders crowding the narrow doorway.

For a moment, as he looked at Jane, a smile broke over his face, deepening the lines beside his mouth.

"There she sits, Mike," Jane indicated with a jerk of her cigarette, "getting inured to this graveyard atmosphere, against the business of having her famous smile tucked into a lump of clay." She shrugged and looked up with a grimace at the man before her.

"Well—" said Michael, "And why not?" For a brief moment, as his eyes met hers, Julie caught a spark of amused collusion. As though, was her swift thought, he were a husband who frankly loved his wife, and stood up for her before a third: Jane. It was decent of him to do it. . . . Then he had turned to Jane. "It won't be cold here," he was saying, casual and reassuring.

"No—" Jane laughed, "I don't suppose it really will." Then walking over to the hearth, she dropped her cigarette and trod it out on the bricks. Suddenly, as though an idea had but that moment caught her, she swung about to look at Julie. . . . Her head down-tilted, its smooth contour silhouetted against the small-paned window at her back, as though she had forgotten them both, and time was not, Julie was looking in a sort of trance at Tess, who crouched resignedly at her feet. Michael had calmly walked past to the other end of the room, and was gazing in silence, and with grave interest, at a picture hanging there: the bold, vigorous sketch in charcoal, on a piece of brown paper, of a rearing colt on a halter, the slim body of the lad who held him, leaning to throw every ounce of weight upon the rope. . . . It was as if a spell had been cast over the room—over them all, thought Jane. The utter silence seemed actually for a moment to stay the

words that had sprung to her lips. —Absurd! She laughed softly, and broke through the enchantment.

"You can quote the little rhyme about the cat who was killed . . . if you want to, Cocks"—(Ah! they had waked, those others)—"But do you mind telling me what you're goin' to do with this old treasure of a house? I only ask because I know someone who would be terribly keen to have it, if ever—"

Michael literally whirled about. "God, no, Jane! It's not for sale—" Then with a short laugh, turning to the silent figure in the window, "Or is it, Julie?" he asked queerly.

"Of course not, Michael," Julie found herself saying, and knew, strangely, that she had given Michael cause for great relief. Why, she did not at the moment ask herself.

"Might live here in the summer," she offered lightly, looking at Jane. "I didn't realize—quite—how keen Mike was about the old house . . ."

"Yes—I am," he said succinctly; and turning to Jane, completely ignoring that but the moment before he had snapped up with extraordinary and unexpected asperity her most innocent question—calmly changed the subject.

"Hear you've got a grand filly, Jane—out of old Mayfair . . ."

"Come and see her," suggested Jane, with extreme friendliness, lighting another of her endless cigarettes.

"I'll be ready when you come back, Michael," put in Julie. "I have to look up a thing or two, against Pat's coming."

. . . Was Michael going to demur? He started to speak, then, evidently thinking better of it, broke off and

looked at Julie for a moment of silent consideration. "I'd like to, Jane," he said at last, without turning his head.

What had made Michael swing, so almost savagely, on Jane, with his vehement "God no!"? thought a troubled Julie, as she looked to the blankets and appurtenances of the little room that would be Pat's. —What could it be to Michael what became of this old house? She stood for a minute at the window, looking out across the bare trees of the orchard to a great airy cloud sailing high over a pine tree on the slope beyond. Then turning slowly away, she went about the further business of getting the house ready to receive Pat English and his "lump of clay".

4

She was sitting beside him. They were going down the hill, and a great honey-colored full moon kept pace with the car, slipping behind the trees to the east, sliding into the open over farms and haycocks—remote, never slackening the pace that was theirs.

It stirred Michael unspeakably to have Julie there beside him, the faint, unconscious pressure of her shoulder against his as they swung about a curve, or swerved to pass some other car. . . . How could she help knowing how she was pulling him—every bit of him—to her! He wanted to speak to her, to hear her voice—answering . . . But he was dumb . . . He couldn't. Her head half turned from him, looking out at the moon riding with them up there . . . at the woods and moonlit fields and farms slid-

ing past, she seemed quite unconscious of his presence. . . . She wore no hat. Faintly there came to him the cool subtlety of white violets which was a part of her. He had not once looked at her. He did not have to . . . He knew it all— Every little characteristic gesture. Her smooth, burnished hair . . . that line of the part . . . the darkness of her lashes . . . her fugitive smile that was so intriguing . . . the lovely alluring lines of her face. . . . What went on behind the long green eyes that laughed and teased, or went off, as now, aloof, unneedful of another human being? . . . God—if he could know! . . . The wind was rising. Coming out into the open where the road swept in a curve through fields, it rushed coldly at them. "What a night, Michael!" Without turning to him, Julie was speaking. —"It's blowing up colder."

"Are you warm enough, Julie?" he asked her.

"Oh, yes—" she turned her face to him then: "I was just thinking how such days fool us. We want the spring, so badly . . . A day like this holds it out in the palm of its hand. You reach for it—and it's flicked away. Instead, a cold wind blows a handful of hail in your face." She gave a rueful laugh. "It's a lot like life—isn't it, Mike?"

"Yes—a lot!" His words, their swift unforeseen vehemence, annoyed him. "Have to do some chain-lightning grabbing before it's flicked away," he finished, forcing his tone to lightness, and heard Julie's soft amused laugh.

"We cry for the moon," she said, her head once more tilted away, and he felt the slight lift of her shoulder as she shrugged. "And she?—he?—I never could make up my mind which—runs along over the hilltops and the

woods . . . laughing: 'Silly children, I'm here to light you, not to burn your fingers' It's right, I suppose, Michael." They were crossing the bridge, and for a second caught the misty shine of moonlight on ice and dark water. "If we could only keep our course with such laughing constancy" The words trailed off into the rush of the wind, and Julie was quiet.

An overwhelming desire swept Michael, to turn and take her in his arm . . . to crush her close, and hold her there—his . . . so that no man— How could he talk of the moon—or life? His longing for her beat about him until there was nothing else . . . and it almost spoke aloud . . . He must not let this silence grow. Like a spar to a man drowning, there floated past him the thought of his vehement words of that morning. He grasped it frantically and plunged ahead:

"Julie—" he tried to make his voice appear casual—"I must have sounded rather foolish this morning, snapping off Jane's head about your house. It was stupid and unnecessary . . ."

They were coming to the town, passing the old square tavern at the turn. The lights shone out. The tang of woodsmoke was in the wind . . .

"After all, Michael," Julie was speaking evenly, her face averted, "you *are* my husband. You have the right to say, and do . . . lots of things." (Was she sincere, or did she laugh?) "I only wondered why you cared . . . so much . . ." Slowly, then, she turned to him. "Was it because—for me to have a place of my own . . . to go to, Michael?"

He did not dare to move his head. He could not look at her . . . or she must see—everything. . . . What had

made her say that? How could she know—? —A place to go to!

His eyes fastened on the light thrown before them (they had left the town behind and were rushing along now through the flat low country beyond), with every ounce of his control put forth, he spoke:

“If you want to take it that way, Julie” . . .

He knew that her eyes were upon his face . . . Failing of the help she perhaps had sought—which he could not give—she began to speak:

“Oh, Michael—” her voice was low and appealing—
“Can’t we be friends, even? If not . . .”

It had actually come, thought Michael desperately. And there, before them, was Uncle David’s gate . . . the old white house, dwarfed by its enormous hemlocks. Good God! . . . what could he say? He swerved sharply to avoid a wheelbarrow in the shadow beyond the gatepost, and dragged on the brakes. A figure, silhouetted for a moment against the light from the open doorway, was bounding toward them. . . . “Did you hit it, Mike?” came a troubled boyish voice . . . It was Micky.

“Who in hell left it there?” snapped Michael with surprising crispness.

“I did,” answered the irrepressible Micky, for once shocked into meekness. He dashed on past them to the offending wheelbarrow, and they heard him trundle it off toward a shed. It squeaked atrociously, in protest. Michael, staring after the retreating figure, saw the boy emerge from the shadow into a splash of moonlight. In swift penitence for his sharp words, he turned to Julie.

She was standing beside the car, in the cool moonlight,

the dark fur cloak she wore, wrapped close about her. She was looking at him . . . Was she smiling?

Suddenly Michael laughed. "Did you ever know such a crosspatch, Julie?" He slid out and stood looking down into her face. . . . She was not smiling . . . Young Micky was running back to them. "Terribly sorry, Mike," he gasped.

"You needn't be, old fellar," Michael told him, giving the boy's shoulder a friendly shake . . .

Micky heaved a sigh of genuine relief. "Lordy!" he burst out comically, "how the squeal of your brakes made my stomach ache! . . . I was bringing in the plants from the greenhouse." (They were all three now walking toward the house). "Uncle David's pet cherry-colored geraniums. I forgot all about the damn thing . . ."

With her foot on the doorstep, Julie laughed softly back at them. "Does you good to run into a wheelbarrow . . . now and then, Micky," she said.

Michael heard her with a curious wonder.

5

There were too many of them, to sit demurely strung about the table. Toby's birthday had obligingly fallen on a Saturday, and seven Sheridans were there.

In the low, plant-filled dining room (plenty of sun came in at its western windows for David Cockrane's famous geraniums), the flames of the candles in the two branching silver candelabra shone mistily on the old mahogany table heaped with every device known to the art of Ellen

to tempt the eye, and cause the downfall, of man. The lovely shallow bowl of pewter, that had been made for Great-uncle William Cochrane by Samuel Danforth himself, was filled with ruddy apples and (to Pip's silent delight) great bunches of white and purple grapes. About it were ranged ham, tongue, salads, a quivering mound of aspic flanked by the blue Canton dish filled with baked potatoes (Toby adored them) and the blue cow pitcher filled with cream. There were crisp brown rolls and pats of fresh butter. There were nuts, and prunes, and figs (the pressed ones that Naomi loved), and thin, apricot wafers (for Julie). Uncle David and old Ellen, with their heads together, had thought of everyone.

"Whew!" whistled stocky Martin as he stood at gaze. And from above the sideboard at his back, the merry eyes of a young officer in the blue uniform of the Union Army (Captain Martin Cochrane, from whom the boy had his name) seemed to twinkle amused assent.

"What is this heavenly concoction, Uncle David?" asked Naomi, tasting some of the aspic Toby had put upon her plate.

"I don't know," confessed the old man, with a smile, "you will have to ask Ellen, my dear."

But Martin, his fair thatch bent over his plate, cocked an eye at his mother. "I was there when Ellen and Sophie were dumping it out of the white mold thing . . ." His words came slightly muffled by some of the very dish in question. "It's chicken and truffles, Ma. —Funny things, truffles!" He considered a large piece speared on his fork, then popped it into his mouth. "Darn good, when you get used to 'em!"

"Young epicure!" Toby ruffled the boy's hair.

"What's that?" asked Martin, still chewing on the truffle.

"Greedy-gut," obliged Micky from beyond, giving his young brother a prod in the ribs, that was nearly disastrous to the contents of the latter's plate.

"Here now, boys—" interposed their father cheerfully, "none o' that!"

Tom had dragged Michael over to the fire, and standing on the hearth, plate in hand, had plunged into a discussion on the deflation of the dollar.

Pip, regardless of food, as always when interested in something, brought Julie a plate filled neatly, a roll sitting perkily on the rim, and, forgetting to go back for his own, sat down beside her under a jungle of superb geraniums in the window, to burst straightway into further questions on a subject that had been interrupted: Pat English sculpting Julie's head to take to Paris.

Laughing, Julie beckoned to Tim, quietly eating, a little apart from them all. "Get this young scatter-brain something to chew on, Timmy, will you?" But of course Pip jumped up, as she had known he would, grinned, and departed . . .

Her eyes went immediately to Michael. She forgot Pip, and all else, as she watched the big figure in dinner clothes standing before the fire. Turned sidewise, he leaned one shoulder against the low mantelpiece, looking down now and then from Tom to his plate. His splendid head was dark against the creamy white of the panel above. The light of a candle near him on the shelf shone on his crisp hair and strong, thin face. He looked tired. Ap-

parently listening intently to what Tom had to propound on a serious matter, Julie knew by the curious, intense preoccupation of that lean profile that he was not there at all. He could do that so well! She knew all about it. If only that apartness could be as satisfying to her as to the boy eating and talking there, oblivious and content, beside him! He had always had a way of going off like that, even as a boy. But then it had only given a sense of repose and peacefulness . . . not getting in the way of things. Now, thought Julie, with a hopeless feeling of frustration, it took him straight away out of her reach . . . where he seemed to want to be. What could she do? What was the best for them both,—for her to go—or to stay? . . . Toby was standing before her—had evidently been speaking to her. She turned her head and looked at him. . . . How extraordinarily good-looking he was! she thought quickly. A reckless sort of devil, too! A sparkle of that recklessness was there, now, in the eyes bent upon her.

“. . . Well—?” he gave a short laugh.

“Well—?” she echoed, and laughed, too. “I’ll have to admit it, Toby . . .”

She knew, suddenly, that he had not even heard her.—Oh! he shouldn’t look at her like that? . . . And she couldn’t do anything so simple as tell him so. She must just appear not to notice. . . . “Sit down, Toby,” she said lightly, turning to pat the chair Pip had left. And, with a smile, faintly mischievous, that totally disregarded the whole situation: “‘Let’s talk it over’ . . .” she quoted.

But Toby did not sit down. “What’s the matter, Julie?” he asked queerly, instead. “You can’t just put me off like

that . . . You were sitting here looking as though you'd lost your last friend. —Got a headache, or something?" he finished awkwardly.

She knew a thrust of desperate wonder as to how she was going to handle things . . . and then, that she must keep a light touch. "No—" Somehow she achieved a sober gravity that was really amusing, as she raised her eyes to Toby (Pip was coming back, thank God!), "I was just wondering . . . whether I'd have some more chicken . . . or try a slice of tongue . . ."

"Quite momentous!" His voice came oddly sharp. Then, as though flicking over a page of no import: "Where did you get that grand little 'Toby' jug you gave me?"

"Right in our own town . . . from old Miss Nichols," answered Julie, her heart still beating faster than its wont, at her sudden escape from a danger that had seemed so imminent. "She always had a soft spot in her spinster heart for your curly head, Toby. She let me have it for you."

"I love it," he answered simply. Then he turned on his heel and walked away.

Suddenly, across the width of the room, Julie's eyes met another pair, lighted with a kindly old twinkle. David Cochrane raised the glass he held, in a silent toast. She smiled. He bowed his fine old head, and drank to her. . . . Pip, balancing a plate on three fingers and carrying a glass of milk, bore down upon her. Julie sighed, and then a faint smile touched her lips. Thank God for Pips and Uncle Davids! . . . "What did you get, Pip!" she asked.

"Everything!" grinned Pip, and slid down beside her. "Go on, Julie." . . .

6

Toby had gone back into the dining room, with the empty coffee cups. The little handleless cups of Lowestoft, with their blue, star-filled border, their bird over the blue lozenge with its gold 'C', that had, so far, even with slap-dash, coffee-drinking boys, miraculously escaped calamity. David Cochrane used his possessions . . . however rare, with a fine disregard of user or occasion, and with, thus far, extraordinary success. . . . Michael was playing the old piano in the firelit, paneled parlor, and they were all dancing and rioting about to the merry tinkle of the thin old notes. Julie was dancing amusedly with Sherry . . . teasing and gay. Toby had watched her . . . wanting, with every ounce of him, to be in Sherry's shoes . . . God, what a mess it all was! You couldn't make a *move* without thinking—thinking! He was sick of it, —fed up with this stupid, cautious way of going. What difference did it make to anyone, anyway! —Michael—Julie? What did they care if—! He had moved to the fireplace, and leaning an elbow on the mantelpiece stared mutinously down at the flicker of the firelight on the brass tops of the andirons. Out of it he gave a grunt of irony: —Windyhill—like this! Would to God he had never come home! . . . He knew that someone had come to the door . . . "There it is!" It was Naomi's cheerful voice. And turning, he saw his sister swoop on something that had fallen to the floor beyond the table. "Handkerchief," she explained, and coming up to him put her hand on his sleeve. "It's terribly nice to have you here again for your

birthday, Toby," she said fondly; "I've missed you . . ."

She wore a delicious soft thing of lavender and blue, like a spray of delphinium. He wanted to tell her how nice she looked, and that he had missed *her*, too. But he couldn't. He was bitter against all the world, and reckless of hurting even Naomi. He gave a short, scornful laugh and looked down again at the flickering shine of the andirons. "Have you?" he said.

Naomi's hand dropped slowly from his arm. "What is it, old man?" she asked quietly. "Is it Julie?"

He jerked up his head. "How did you know!" He had hurled the words at her, and was staring furiously.

Naomi only gave a sorry shake of her head, holding her eyes somberly on his. "My dear . . ." she whispered.

Toby's head still up-flung, a reckless sparkle leaped to his eyes. "Yes, I love her!" he said defiantly, uncaring. "Who's goin' to stop me! Not she—and certainly not Michael!" he finished bitterly.

Naomi, with heaven-sent wisdom, stood quietly looking past him into the fire. "Do you want to tell me?" she asked simply, at last.

"It's just an inconceivably God-awful mess!" he burst out. He flung away and took a few steps, then wheeled back. "I can't understand it. —Michael's just a stone image,—*stone*, I tell you, Naomi! By God! I'm not. I'm human— Too damned human . . . to stick it. . . ."

Without stirring, Naomi spoke: "Why must you, my dear?" she asked very gently.

"*Why must I?*" He whipped the words out in savage derision, and then went on blindly, "Oh, you think I'm a skunk—a hanger-on—"

"No," came the calm answer.

"I tried to go—" his voice broke on a note of intolerable misery—"and Mike said— He doesn't *dream*—

"Never mind, Naomi." He was speaking harshly again. He knew it, and he did not care. He was through with it all—fighting and doubting.

"Let the best man win, I say!"

Very slowly Naomi turned and put her hand once more upon her brother's arm. "Toby," she said, and it was to Toby strangely as though his mother spoke. "Ah, Toby—don't. They are married . . ."

"*Married!*" The word was scorn itself.

Naomi looked at him a moment with lovely, grave eyes; then she spoke, more gently still: "Yes, Toby . . . even so."

The brief, quiet words caught Toby and held him, as nothing else then could have done. He looked at his sister with a curious expression. The reckless rebellion slowly died within him, leaving a sort of blank despair. He fetched a great sigh, and taking her chin between his fingers turned her face up to his. "You're damned decent," he said.

"So are you, thank God!" Toby saw the tears shining . . .

"Come and dance," he said jerkily—"to Mike's piping."

7

The Sheridans had gone. Toby, too—walking off in the bright moonlight with Pip, because he loved the old

town with the lights shining out of the little houses. "Makes me feel like a kid again, Uncle David," he had said, with a laugh.

And now Julie was playing. Something old David Cochrane had asked for. With his retriever (mother to Fanny, and grandmother of Pip's wedding present to Julie), fat past belief, snoring faintly at his feet, the old man rocked gently and happily in the Windsor chair with a comb back, at the corner of the hearth . . . dreaming of the past. From the deep leather armchair at the other side of the fireplace, with the bobtailed tortoiseshell cat curled up on his knees, Michael could see them both: the old, happy, dreaming man he loved, his white head resting against the back of the chair, his thin, fine, old hand, meticulously holding the stem of his straight-stemmed pipe, the deep red of a silk sock catching the firelight, as he rocked, and the space of ankle lengthened with the motion—and Julie. . . . The light of the candles in the tall branched candlestick of twisted silver that stood on the piano gleamed on her smooth hair. Her face, half turned from him, was pale and lovely against the dim blue of a curtain . . . She was miles from him . . . miles from them all . . . the old man, gently rocking, the bobtailed cat, the sleeping dog, on the rug, and him . . . She might have been quite alone. She seemed to need no one. Her head lifted . . . looking off into the dusky corner of the room, she sang—as a bird sings—joyously, loving it . . . unself-conscious and free. So thought Michael.

. . . She had been like that all the evening. Gay and inconsequent. Keeping them all—the boys, Sherry, and

Uncle David—and, at last, Toby, when he had snapped out of one of his funny glum fits—laughing and fascinated . . . Always just out of reach. Serenely unconscious of it, of him, too. And he was so achingly conscious of her—of what she said, or did not say, of where she was, and what she did . . . He dragged his eyes away from her now and dropped them to the ball of fur curled up on his knees. His pipe had gone out. He did not even bother to light it again . . . Julie had stopped singing, and was playing, very softly, a drowsy lullaby. Michael could hear the tiny creak of Uncle David's chair, as the old man rocked, listening and content. Julie played on . . . that lilting old song to hush a baby to sleep. A log fell apart. The tall clock in the hall began to strike . . . Michael had not the remotest idea what time it was. With a satisfying sequence of chords, Julie stopped playing, and turning to them was speaking. Michael lifted his head.

"Gentlemen, it grows late," she said. "Doesn't it, Michael?" deferring to him. She got up from the piano, and leaning toward the candlestick sent a half-questioning glance at David Cochrane, who had got to his feet.

"Shall I blow out your candles for you, Uncle David?" she asked; "I'm a very frugal person . . . about candles."

The old man chuckled. "So am I," he confessed, with delight for her. And, his eyes a-twinkle, watched Julie blow out all three candle flames.

She came over then to the fire, where they were. Michael got up and put the bobtailed cat into his chair. Julie walked slowly across to David Cochrane and stood looking up at him with that faint smile about her lips. "I've had a beautiful time, Uncle David," she said; "who could

help it, in your house? . . . You're rather a darling, you know, and I've always wanted to tell you so. Now I can." David Cochrane bent and kissed her on her forehead. "Funny child!" he said as he straightened up again. "Isn't she, Mike?" And Michael had to meet the happy old eyes with a smile and a light word to match.

Suddenly his uncle swung round to look at Julie. "Why should you two have to go home to-night?" he asked, hugely pleased with the idea. "Spend the night with me, and let Ellen show you what real Sunday morning fish cakes are." His eyes brimmed with slow humor at a thought that came to him. "I've got a beautiful new pair of silk pajamas . . . pink and white stripes . . . from Jane Challoner. How about it, Julie?"

"I'd love it, Uncle David," was the surprising answer.

. . . Of course, she didn't know . . . Michael thought desperately of that one spare room of Uncle David's . . . The old four-poster . . . He must get them both out of this—for Julie's sake—for his—

"I've got to get back to the farm to-night, Uncle David," he said, looking quietly into the old man's face. He hated to see the disappointment clouding those gray eyes so like his father's. He felt a sudden bitter shame as he stood there before this fine, simple old man, that all he so took for granted—that *should* have been—he had turned into a mockery. "I'm sorry," he said simply. —Sorry?—he could have cried aloud *how* sorry—for everything. He only said quickly: "There's no reason Julie should have to come, too. Julie'd love the old square room with the blue-tiled fireplace."

She was looking at him. Michael knew that she was.

But she had not spoken. He felt he must. He turned and his eyes met hers. "I'll bring a hat, in the morning, for church," he said, as though it were only an amusing incident.

A strange look came into Julie's face, as if a shadow swept it. "I forgot the hat, Michael," she said. And then, impulsively, to David Cochrane: "Will you have a lone wife?"

"Try me!" was the heartening answer.

There was nothing left for Michael but to get away as quickly as he could.

They went with him to the door. David Cochrane held out his hand. Michael took it. "Good-night, sir," he said; "it's been a grand party."

Then he turned to Julie, standing beside them. What, beneath the innocent old eyes of Uncle David, was there to do, else? He put his hand lightly upon her shoulder and before she knew what he meant to do he had leaned and kissed her: "Good-night, Julie," he said. And, opening the door, no one knew that he was shaking like a foolish boy . . . Julie had not said a word. Did she mind so terribly? he wondered, as he went down the path to the car.

The moon rode high. The night was as light as day. As he started to put his foot on the running-board, he chanced to look down. The front tire was flat. . . . He swore softly, remembering that the spare tire was at the shop, having the tube mended. —Well—that was that! He couldn't go back. He turned sharply away and walked off down the lane . . . out on to the moonlit road winding into the town.

8

They had gone to get some milk and crackers, Julie and Uncle David, the bobtailed cat and Biddy the spaniel.

Coming back into the hall, David Cochrane stopped before a chair where were carefully laid his coat with a cape and his cap. He sent Julie a whimsical look. "I always go out for a breather with Biddy and The Tortoise," he confided; "will you toast your toes by the fire till I come back?"

Julie smiled slowly up into his eyes. "I like breathers myself, Uncle David . . ."

The old man laughed with delight; and, like two conspirators, they helped each the other into a coat.

"You hardy women . . . with your imprudent hatless heads— And it's a lovely head, my dear." The old, happy eyes twinkled into hers as he put on his cap and opened the door.

There before them, just where they had left it, she and Michael, was the big roadster, lonely under the moon! What could it mean?

"The front tire's quite flat, Julie," observed Uncle David. "Just like the silly fellar, to go walkin' off . . . and say nothing!" . . . (Was it? Julie wondered miserably.) "What, d'ye s'pose, took him in such a rush to the farm to-night?"

Wildly, in her mind, Julie ran the gamut of possibilities that would serve— She knew, without knowing the reason, that Michael had not wanted to stay . . . "A calving, perhaps," she got out; "it does happen, you know."

She heard a low chuckle from David Cochrane. It *had* served.

"I love that boy," the old man said suddenly. And before she knew it her words had flown to meet his: "So do I . . ."

A cold wind had sprung up. It swooped down across the chimneys, bringing the sharp pungency of wood smoke blowing about them. They walked along the lane to the gate. There they turned. The bobtailed cat hopped out of a shadow and stalked on before them. The house shone white in the moonlight, dwarfed by the dark hemlocks behind. Far away, across the fields beyond the road, a train whistled. The sound died away and there was only the swish of the wind in the big trees.

"Nice, isn't it, Julie," came the companionable words.

"Terribly . . ." she answered. . . . Why had Michael gone off like that? Why had he kissed her!

She had shut the bedroom door behind her. She stood with her back pressed against it, looking into the room. . . . She knew, now, why Michael had gone—why he had let nothing stop him . . . This old square room, looking out over the moonlit fields, with the fire burning cheerfully in its blue-and-white tiled fireplace, its huge old field bed with its chintz-covered canopy . . . was the only bedroom but David Cochrane's own. He had just told her so. . . .

When Uncle David had asked them to stay for the night, out of a desperate longing to get away from Windy-hill—from Toby—she had answered. And when she saw Michael demur, she had still gone on with her curious

stubborn determination to stay . . . How could she have known—?

“Oh! How stupid!” she whispered, staring wide-eyed before her, and she felt the slow blood mounting in her face. With it rose a tide of anger, brief and sharp. “I can’t think of everything I say and do,” she flared.

Then dropping her burning face in her hands, “I don’t know what I *am* doing, any more,” she was saying brokenly,—“I love him so.” . . .

Chapter Eleven

I

A HIGH wind, slashed with rain, and bitterly cold, tore at the bare lilac bushes by the corner of the woodshed, and swooped, with a mournful sound, down the big chimney. Pat English leaned his shoulder against the frame of the window and stared in brooding abstraction up into the pines above the orchard. Finding in the tossing pine boughs no solution to his moody thoughts, he turned with impatience and a grunt of frustration and got out a cigarette. He lighted it, let his eyes rest for an unseeing moment on the floor at his feet, then abruptly moved over to a cloth-covered form on a stand. He took off the cloth and stood there looking at the head before him.

"It's incredible— But it's true!" he said after a minute. Slowly, unbelieving, the words dropped into the silence of the room. And still he gazed on the face before him wrought in clay. Then he lifted his dark head. "Good God!" he said somberly, "I love her!"

Once more his eyes were drawn back to the work of his hands. It was good,—extraordinarily good. The artist in him recognized that. But the man in him cared nothing at all for the two weeks' work, nearly perfected: the smile he had come this long way to catch was not there,—instead, this preposterous thing had happened.

The front door opened and shut. He swung sharply about, listening to footsteps crossing the hall.

"Hello, Cats'-eyes!" She stood there in the doorway—unaware—Julie!

". . . Hello, Linnet," he said soberly, while the blood beat and thundered in his ears.

She came in, and her eyes went past him to the cold hearth. "Pat—oh, Pat—" she chided whimsically, "the fire's out. Run, like a good boy, for some wood." She took off the black beret she wore and unwound her muffler. "I'll be looking at myself, face to face . . . to see—" she laughed ruefully,—“well, just to see—”

She was standing before the clay when he came back from the shed with an armful of logs. She turned, and Pat saw a curious expression on her face . . . half questioning—

"There isn't any smile there . . . after all, Pat . . ."

He dumped the logs on the hearth and went down on his knees to start the fire. "No," he said from there at last.

"I thought—" she began; but he interrupted her.

"So did I— But it isn't there any more, Linnet." He twisted swiftly to look up at her. "Why?" he whipped out.

He saw the color creep up into her cheeks, and with

it felt a fury of impotency rise within him. He got to his feet and faced her.

"You're unhappy!" he said tensely.

"No, Pat." With head up she lied bravely to him. He paid not the slightest heed. From his great height he stared down at her in somber disregard of any denial.

"I might not have noticed, once," he said. "Now—I do. It's hell to see you unhappy, Linnet."

"Stop, Pat!" Her voice was low, but it was imperative . . .

For all he noticed them, her words might have been the wind that tossed the trees, unheeded, on yonder hill.

"No," he said roughly. "I don't care for honor—or Mike—or anything on God's earth but you, Linnet!"

"Are you *mad*, Pat?" asked Julie quietly.

"Yes—" he answered,—“after all these years—mad—for you!” And with the stark words still ringing through the room, he came swiftly to stand close before Julie and the clay. Anger, smouldering tawnily in his eyes, burst into sudden flame as he glared fiercely at Julie. “Your smile has gone. . . . I don't want your face that way—” the pent-up fury in his voice made the words cruel. “Not as Michael has made it!” He reached out quickly, before Julie could stop him, and clutching the head of clay dragged it off the stand and hurled it face down upon the hearth.

Mute with horror, Julie watched him.

He stared for a minute, as though dazed, at the mass of clay at his feet. Then, wheeling on Julie, cried out harshly: “Linnet—Linnet! What have I done?”

She came and stood quite close to him and laid a hand

very gently against his breast. "It's I, Pat," she said, and she strove pitifully with her voice that it might be steady. "What do I do . . . to make things so unhappy? *We* had something once, Pat . . . that was fine and simple and big— I've killed . . . that . . . too—"

The unconscious appeal stirred the manhood in Pat English. Looking into her face, very slowly his big hand closed over hers upon his chest, and drew it down.

"I ought to be shot, Linnet . . ." he said unsteadily.

A low sound broke in upon the quiet that followed Pat's words. He swung slowly about, still holding Julie's hand. Then, as slowly, let it drop. . . .

There, in the narrow doorway, stood Michael.

"Hello," he said queerly. "I wonder . . . if I . . . could telephone . . ."

Pat English gazed at the big figure as though it were a ghost.

But Julie, with a little stifled cry, went past him, straight to Michael.

"What's wrong, Mike?" she asked, her eyes fastened upon him.

"Nothing . . ." he said coolly, for all that his face was set and ghastly white. He did not move away from the frame of the door where he leaned. "Just a bit of a mix-up with Jane's colt . . . Smashed the breaking cart . . . and—"

"Get some whiskey, Pat!" Julie said sharply.

"I'm all right . . ." Michael spoke jerkily, looking past them both. "I'll just call up the vet . . ." Still he did not move.

"You're hurt, Michael!" Julie's voice was insistent.

"No—" he said again.

But Pat knew suddenly why Michael did not go to the telephone. He did not trust himself away from the supporting frame of the door. For a brief moment, against his will he found his eyes drawn to Michael's,—held there by a mute and agonized question that he did not understand and could not answer. Then Michael had turned and lurched out into the hall . . .

Julie gave a low cry as Michael spun round and pitched forward on to the floor. And Pat English knew in that moment that it was not lack of *loving* that had broken her.

2

His arm bent across his chest, bandaged tightly about his chest and shoulder, three cracked ribs strapped up and his free wrist badly sprained and in a splint (crashing to the floor with a broken collar bone had not materially helped matters), Michael walked slowly up and down his room at Windyhill.

He should have been in bed— But it didn't really matter very much. A certain picture was burned into his brain with torturous clarity of detail: A great tousled-headed, furious man hurling down upon the hearth a thing of clay . . . the harsh words that followed: "I don't want your face that way . . . as Michael has made it—" Then that man staring, stupefied—as he, too, had, in the doorway, sick and stunned—upon the ruined mass of clay at his feet . . . to burst out, horrified—appalled at his action: "Linnet, Linnet! What have I done?" . . .

In his mind, as he turned restlessly, walking again past his bed, his books, the table with the lamp, to the fireplace—he saw Julie—his wife, go up and lay her hand on that other man's breast . . . speaking brokenly, pitifully— Julie! pitiful and broken-voiced . . . “What do I do to make things so unhappy?” . . . and the man's unsteady answer: “I ought to be shot, Linnet!” . . .

“God!” He winced with pain as he threw up his head— Well—it had come . . . that was all . . .

3

The last thing was crammed into the battered valise. There in the narrow bedroom the big ungainly man knelt and pulled the straps, one then the other, to the last hole he could squeeze them. Then he got to his feet, and without a look about him, grasped the handle and dragged the heavy bag out into the room beyond, where he dumped it with a thud that resounded through the old house. Ruffling his hair into a dark mane, Pat English stared for a moment at the stand where a lump of clay was so carefully covered with a bit of orange cloth. Then, walking up to it, he reached a long arm and ruthlessly pulled away the cloth. Face to face with disaster—for his figure of Annunciation—he laughed aloud. A short, harsh laugh of derision—of defiance to the world and what it might do to him . . . How Larry French and Phil Terrance would howl with laughter at his coming back to that funny old studio of theirs in Paris—with nothing to show, but this!

"Let them—! Let them laugh!" he burst out savagely. (They would not have laughed had they seen his eyes now . . . in this room where he had thrown the work of two weeks upon the bricks at Julie's feet . . . where he had raved for some mad moments over a lost smile—to another man's wife!)

He turned his eyes suddenly away, as though he could not longer bear to look upon the distorted lump of clay before him . . . "Linnet—" he whispered. He swallowed hard, then flung fiercely about and stalked into the kitchen . . .

Half an hour later, leaving all washed and swept behind him, the ice chest doors swinging wide to an empty, scoured interior, he came out and shut the door.

Going over again to the ruined model of Julie's head, he picked up the bit of orange cloth he had flung upon the floor, and, taking down the clay, wrapped it about and mechanically stowed it with his other materials, his modelling implements and stand, in a curious square box that yawned upon the hearth.

. . . *That* was done. Moving the box to stand beside the old valise, he noticed a blotch on the bricks. He hadn't got the oily clay all up! He fetched a cloth and went at it. And then he set to work deliberately to obliterate all traces of habitation . . . burned matches, heaps of cigarette ends— Good Lord! How many, that night, had he smoked? He straightened the things in the room and swept up the hearth. With infinite care for the splendid bank of ashes, he removed each last thing that had been thrown there. The fire had burned out. He saw that logs were there for those who came after him. . . .

A wan light was stealing in at the windows. He went over and looked out. He could see the pines on the hill against a lighter sky. He opened the window and leaned forth.

A fresh wind blew in his face, ruffling his hair, and bringing to him the good earthy smell of the wet orchard. The rain had stopped . . . Up there, over the hill, Julie slept, in Michael's house . . . perhaps in Michael's arms. He didn't know . . . Was she unhappy? . . . Did Michael love her as *he* loved her? *Something* was wrong. Oh, God—it shouldn't have been—for Linnet! . . . What was it she had said, as she stood there before him with the clay lying on the hearth at their feet? He tried to remember her words . . . "We had something once that was—fine and simple" (that was it) ". . . I've killed that, too" . . . What had she meant? Why had this all happened? . . . Suddenly, in the depths of the lilac bush by the woodshed, a bird began to sing—clear and hopeful. A chickadee! "Plucky little beggar!" Pat screwed about; but it was not light enough yet to really make out the tiny feathered body.

Slowly then he pulled back into the room and shut the window . . . He must get on . . . That letter to Linnet. Old Jim, in the station Ford, would be coming for him shortly before six— The milk train went at 6.12. He remembered it well. . . . When the sun got up over the hill and the brook—he would be gone . . . It was better so. What else was there?

He went to the old desk in the corner, and switching on the little pewter lamp, got out some paper and took up a pen. But with his hand lying inert on the paper

he dropped his chin to his other fist, propped there with his elbow resting beside the blank white sheet, and shut his eyes. . . . What could he say? —He was going: that was all. With a sharp sigh, his head came up. He began to write:

I am going away, Linnet. It will take a bigger man than I—to do your head.

Forget that I ever came back, and forgive what you can, Linnet— Only be happy!

PAT.

He folded the short letter without reading what he had written, and sealed it in an envelope. —“Mrs. Michael Cochrane”— For the first time, he wrote that long cloak for Linnet . . . Linnet, with her glory of flaming hair, her gay, alluring eyes and thin, lovely face . . . Mike's wife. “Make her happy, God!” he said, and his voice sounded harsh and unused.

He snapped off the light and heard the sound of a car coming along the lane. —It was over. . . .

He got to his feet and looked about the old familiar room. The room he loved more than any other in the world. —It was as he had found it—with just one more human incident added to the ghostly string stretching back and back . . . Someone knocked on the door.

“Come!” he called out sharply.

He watched the door swing wide. Old Jim stood framed there, blinking into the dim hall. Behind him, dawn streaked the sky above the hill.

He slipped the letter into his pocket. “Come and help me, Jimmy,” he said.

4

That afternoon (Saturday having inevitably come round) found Julie and young Martin riding through the lane by the river. It was a date of a week's standing.

Jogging along the muddy ruts under the hemlocks, Solomon reached at his bit, and even rose to a sly nip at the hogged mane of Tags: a lean blue roan with a ratted tail,—the sole Sheridan pony. There came, suddenly, a raucous long-drawn crow, the drumming whirr of a cock pheasant getting up and away. An emancipated Tess poked her head forth from a tangle of blueberry bushes. Her tongue hung out; one floppy ear was caught back at a rakish angle. Martin gave a shout of laughter. "Rats—Rats— After 'em, Tess!" The small black head was withdrawn and a frantic rustling ensued among the wet bushes at the roadside. Sobering, the boy twisted sideways in his saddle to look at Julie.

"Why did Mr. English have to go, on a Saturday?" he asked— "Just when he was goin' to ride with us, and had a bet about stayin' on The Djinn . . . ? Must 'a been in an awful hurry! . . . I s'pose your head was finished, anyway, Julie, or he wouldn't have . . ."

"Yes," said Julie soberly. "It was . . ." She thought of that 'head' as she had last seen it, face down on the bricks of the hearth. She thought of the brief note, in Pat's scrawling hand, brought to her at breakfast time that morning by old Tim . . .

"He was sorry to have to go, Marty," she explained simply. "But he did really have to, I think, old man."

“... I suppose so,” observed Martin cheerfully . . . “Let’s go over the bridge into the ten-acre field, and round by Todd’s farm.” And as they clattered over the boards and into the squelching field: “Tell me about Mrs. Challoner’s colt, and Mike . . . Mike’s often broken colts before. Ma said he had . . . How did it happen? Do you know?”

“The colt ran away,” said Julie, turning to meet a pair of serious clear eyes . . . “Michael never says much about things that happen to him . . .”

“No.” Martin spoke soberly. “Brave men don’t.” Julie wondered, with a stab of commiseration, if women who said nothing could be included in that category . . .

“Toby saw the stable boy at the Challoners’. He was there,” she went on, “when it happened. The colt, running blind, crashed into a corner of the paddock hurdles . . . tipped over the breaking cart and threw Mike out. Andy told Toby that Mike hung on to the reins and was dragged a good way before the colt stopped—this time, bang up against a shed.”

“Gosh! It must ’a hurt!” burst out a wide-eyed Martin.

“Yes.” Julie thought of the man standing grim and white-faced in the doorway . . . turning without a word to pitch headlong on to the floor . . .

“Aren’t you terrible proud of him, Julie?”

“Yes—” she swallowed hard, and somehow smiled into the boy’s expectant face,—“‘terrible!’”

Keeping to the edge of the field, they climbed the slope at the farther side. At the top of the little hill they pulled up their ponies. There below them was Todd’s farm, with its red house and barns. Its two big elms. A dog was

barking. A wisp of smoke rose from one squat chimney. Against the clear sky to the west a dim blue mountain loomed: beautiful and remote. . . . Suddenly Martin was speaking. Julie came back from the far-off mountain.

". . . Don't you think so? . . . How about asking Mrs. Todd if she has any?" He cocked a hopeful eye at Julie.

"Any what, old fellar?" she said, smiling involuntarily at the blank look on Martin's ingenuous rosy face.

"Maple sugar . . . ! Mike adores it, Julie . . ."

"And you don't . . ." Julie added humorously.

Martin sent back an engaging grin, and they rode on down through the wide cedar pasture to the farm below.

5

Julie had thought, when she came in to tea, that Michael was, of course, in his room. But sitting there by the tea things in the library, with the dogs, just as she had come in from riding, she had suddenly heard voices coming from Michael's den: Toby's, raised in protest; then a deeper voice, that could only belong to Michael, low and insistent. . . . She could not hear the words, and naturally did not want to,—but why was Michael so utterly disregarding everything that Dr. Vincent had told him to do? . . . reckless of all sensible ways of going, with as many cracked and broken bones as that miserable colt of Jane's had given him . . . How hopelessly difficult it all was—to sit by, forced to watch, in silence, things going forward that could so wring your heart. All through a fog of misunderstanding . . . that grew into a sort of

cold formality between her and Michael. If only she could be free of this thing that held her fast! This terrifying love for a man who— Oh— She turned restlessly away from staring out to the paling east above the dark trees on the crown of the hill . . . and there on the table across the hearth stood the old copper jar she loved, filled with fresh yellow jonquils! They had certainly not been there at lunch time! How could she have helped noticing them when she came in? That she should not have done so was the measure of her misery. It brought with it now a tiny jab of fear . . . She got up, without having touched any tea, and going slowly over to the low table where they were, stood looking down at the golden heads of the jonquils. Suddenly, with a choky feeling in her throat, she leaned and buried her face in their cool, spring fragrance . . . Who could have put them there? Certainly not Sam or Hannah. Poor darlings, they were both incapable of getting flowers into a vase without having them look as stiff as a bunch in the window of a country florist's shop . . . Slowly she shook her head. It was just a part of the misty, unreal world she was struggling with now. With an aching desire for action that would brush all this shadowy world aside . . . to let go for a moment and forget . . . her thoughts turned instinctively to music. Without waiting a further moment, she went to the piano and sat down before it.

She had played first a fragment of Liszt—her eyes dreaming and lost in the beauty of the music . . . And then, with no conscious volition, her fingers had wandered into Massenet's "Manon", Without a thought, she had begun to sing that poignant song of a man's love . . . Beautiful

and sorrowful and thrilling, her voice filled the firelit room . . . fulfilling her need to forget . . . freeing the cry of her own heart, in the words of that other lover . . . "Manon—" the lovely heartbreaking final note, transcending all love and grief, held for a moment . . . grew faint, and died away. In absolute silence, Michael was standing in the doorway.

Julie saw him. Her heart beat thickly. There was a strange look upon his face, as though for a second of time she had caught him unaware . . . when he had forgotten to hold on . . .

He came into the room; and, without a word to Julie, went and stood by the window, looking up to the woods against the sky. Julie did not speak, either. She did not even move . . . except to follow with her eyes the big one-armed figure, his coat buttoned clumsily over the bandages beneath. He looked very tall, standing there beyond the reach of the firelight, dark against the last reflection of the dying sunset caught in the sky over the hill.

. . . "I love 'Manon'." He spoke quietly, impersonally, without using her name. "You sing it supremely well."

"I hope it didn't break up some confab of yours and Toby's," she said lightly, that curious cold perverseness taking hold of her.

"No," answered Michael, almost crisply. "Toby's gone over to the Challoners'—about the colt. Jane and Josh are back."

There was a pause, as he still stood there by the window, silhouetted against the twilight world outside. —If only she could go over to him . . . stand close to him, as

her heart cried out to do, and ask him how he really was! But she could not. She could not do one natural thing . . . say one simple word. The clutch of absurd restrictions held her. . . . She *must* break free and get out . . . if only for a single moment, before something broke in her from the strain. Her eyes leaving Michael fell suddenly on the jonquils in their copper jar. In a little rush of appreciation for the soft yellow glow of them in the light from the fire, words came, spontaneous and unpremeditated.

"Did you put the jonquils there in that old copper jar, Michael? They are too lovely." Simple and naïve, the words broke the hush that had fallen.

"Yes." It was a mere answer: no more. Then, so suddenly, so unforeseen that Julie felt a sharp spasm of fear, Michael wheeled about to face her. Sweeping aside the silence, her effort toward friendliness, as though they had not been, he was speaking in a tense voice, almost harshly.

"I could not help seeing, Julie . . ." He paused, as though finding it very hard to go on—

"Seeing what, Michael?" The words sprang, in self-defense, from Julie's bewilderment.

"My God!" he whipped out, "is there no end?"

Mutely for a moment she waited. Then: "You will have to explain, Michael," she said, forcing her voice to steadiness. She had never seen him like this. It stirred in her a curious anger, that died as she met his eyes, and slid off into pity.

"I saw Pat English hurl your head face down upon the hearth— I heard him say— Oh, Julie!" he broke

out, "if I've hurt you so much, why don't you *do* something about it? . . . Or is it for me—? Be fair to me, at least, and tell me. I would never hold you—" He had left the window and was coming slowly to her where she sat. Julie knew a moment of breathless fear . . . It was the end of everything . . .

He was standing close to the piano. In the half-dusk his figure loomed above her, cut out against the firelight behind him. Julie could not clearly see his face . . . only that dark outline, hiding—how much of physical pain? what depths of misunderstanding? . . . In a sudden and overwhelming surge of pity for his blindness, all other emotions were for the moment swept aside. "What is it, Michael?" she said unsteadily.

"You love him—don't you, Julie? . . . You and Pat . . . love each other. . . ." In her own misery Julie missed the deeper note of misery behind the man's almost harshly spoken words . . . "He needn't have gone away . . ." Michael added queerly.

"Pat loves me—"

"And you—?"

"No— No—" she whispered, wide-eyed. She shook her head, "No—" she said again desperately.

Michael drew in his breath sharply and swung away.

From before the fire, he turned once more to face her, and spoke with somber quietness. She caught the brooding look that smouldered in his eyes. "Forgive me, will you, Julie?" he said, looking at her across the dusky space between. She shivered, as though with deadly cold. "Of course," she answered, in the same formal, subdued voice he had used.

"I simply wanted to remind you—" he went on evenly, "of a certain pact of ours— You do remember it, don't you?"

. . . God, how cruel he could be! . . . "Yes, I remember it, Michael," she said.

"Well—that's all that matters, really. Let's have some tea. I see you haven't had any yet. Neither have I."

How much longer could this terrible game go on? Julie wondered hopelessly . . . while with apparent casualness she poured out a cup of tea for Michael and then for herself . . . hearing, even, as though some other voice spoke from far away, her own offhand words— "Marty insisted that you loved maple sugar and must have some. So we rode around by Todd's farm and he wheedled some out of the good woman's larder . . ."

Michael gave a short laugh and reached for a cigarette. "Have one?" he asked.

Taking it from him, her hand for a second touched his, and found it icy cold. . . . He ought to be in bed, she thought miserably, as she leaned over for the light he held for her. —If she only had the right—!

"Does your shoulder hurt a lot, Michael?" she asked, suddenly raising her eyes to his face.

He looked at her for a quiet moment. "Not a bit!" he answered.

Chapter Twelve

I

EASTER vacation was on foot. Roving at large, Micky and Martin had come upon Julie and Pip at work on the bed of bulbs under the dining room window at Windyhill—taking off the last of the winter covering. Closing one eye in a slow wink at his amused side partner, Pip had remarked that they were just in the nick of time. “We’re off for some milk and cookies . . . a date with Hannah and the canary,” he had added slyly, obviously not including the two newcomers. “If you fellars take on this stuff—perhaps—”

Left to their own devices, in the hopes held forth by their elder brother of possible cookies to come, the two boys had worked in a leisurely fashion that lagged lamentably behind the brisk conversion that went forward between them and would have sounded to a listener, had there been one, absurdly like two good-natured starlings

chattering over a super-find of slugs. Out of it, presently, Micky had burst into a song:

"On the first day of *April*, my true love sent to me
A-a partri-idge in a pear tree . . ."

he chirruped.

"Of *Christmas*, you nut!" protested Martin.

"April fool! —Don't you s'pose I know it?" was the delighted retort.

"I forgot it was April Fool's Day," Martin brought out thoughtfully, after a full minute had elapsed . . . "Never mind—!"

"It's *some* fool's day *every* day," observed Micky cryptically, and in utter disregard of the other's obvious warning to look out for himself on that particular one.

"Oh, dry up!" Martin twisted about on a pair of muddy knees and gave a fat gurgle. "Go on with the 'second day' . . . the two turtle doves . . . four calling birds—however it does go. It's awful silly; but I like it." . . .

The date with Hannah having come to a satisfactory ending, Pip bearing a tray triumphantly aloft, and Julie following, with an eager Tess in tow, the two emerged into the dining room, in time for Micky's burst of song, and what followed of repartee.

Pip came to a stop, and listened. Then, grinning over his shoulder at Julie, he deposited the tray swiftly on the sideboard and leaned out of the window just above the pair of makeshift gardeners.

"Sing on, MacDuff," he drawled; "but first, hand up that partridge—"

An answer in the form of a wad of wet leaves flew past

his shoulder and plopped on to the rug. Pip withdrew, and down came the window. He turned to Julie with a disarming chuckle. "Sorry!" he said, and retrieving the bit of garden covering, he slid the window up for just long enough to fling forth the damp token of young Micky's regard. It caught the latter on the tip of the ear. Then: "Why don't we eat right here, Julie?" he suggested wickedly, standing with arms akimbo as he surveyed the plate of cookies and the old hound pitcher. But suddenly the teasing light died out of his face. His eyes became dreaming and happy. Stretching forth a hand, he caressed, with gentle fingers, the shining glaze of the hound's back. Julie nodded slowly as he turned to her, remembering queerly a happy impromptu supper with Michael . . . and a conversation. "Yes, that's what it does to me, too, Pip . . . "

"You're even better than Ma, about guessing what someone's goin' to say . . . It isn't guessing, really—" his eyes rested in naïve approval on Julie's face. "You're terribly nice," he said simply. "I like you—enormously." (Pip had a most effective way of saying nice things. It was so unself-conscious and direct.)

"Do you, Pip?" Julie was smiling. Pip took up a cookie and absently bit into it. "Yes, I do—" He lifted his eyebrows in comical assurance. "I think Mike's damn lucky," he observed with emphasis.

Someone banged on the window. "Hey there!" Pip, quite unperturbed, knowing full well who banged, and why, went on eating his cookie. He reached over and poured out a glass of milk; and, turning his back to the window, leaned an elbow on the corner of the sideboard

and looked soberly at Julie. "Wait a minute," he said. "You don't have to bother about 'em, yet. . . . I'm goin' to do a rotten thing, perhaps," he went on seriously, "and tell you something, for what's it's worth. I don't believe you know it. You couldn't, really—or it wouldn't be goin' on."

Something clutched at Julie's heart, and for a minute as she faced an unsmiling Pip everything seemed to stop.

"What are you driving at, Pip?" Her words fell with a surprising and calm restraint, that for a moment seemed to damp Pip's ardor . . . But only for a moment.

"Mike's been schoolin' again," he said impetuously. "Toby got the doctor to tell him he was an ass (that's the way Toby put it), and there was a bit of a row between 'em— Mike and Toby. That's all the good it did!" He turned, with the words, to put down his untouched glass of milk. And Julie found herself noticing that one arm of the old silver candlestick, beyond, was badly bent. Why should she notice such things, when everything was smashing around her—in her—? she thought. And then: What, that was convincing, could she answer to this serious, boy's face before her? —What else, but that which was a lie? . . . How could she say that she knew—? How could she, without shaking Pip's faith in Michael . . . in marriage, tell him the truth: that she did not. . . . Oh, why—but that he was fed up and unhappy about it and wanting to break loose—was Michael doing this crazy thing?

"Not *all* the good, Pip," she was forcing her voice to quietness,—“though it was too bad he and Toby scrapped.” She gathered all her forces and went on—“I don't think Michael will do something foolish long. He doesn't often.

But everyone likes to do crazy things now and then" . . . Her lips quivered into a smile. "Don't you, Pip?"

The boy gave a relieved laugh. "You bet!" he agreed. "And you did know—all the time; and never tried to butt in." Admiration rang in his voice. "Just waiting for him to come to his senses! I call that wonderful. Men do so hate to be stopped."

"What's all this, Pip?" A voice from the doorway brought Julie about. It was Michael.

His eyes seeking those of his uncle in swift eagerness to answer, Pip failed to see the color flood up into Julie's face. He plunged right into his confession.

"I just did a rotten thing, Mike," he said. "I'd like to tell you about it.

"I was in a funk over your fooling round with that crazy colt again, after getting so smashed up . . . I asked Julie if she knew . . ." his face broke into a sudden smile. "She did . . . all the time, Mike—and didn't let a peep out of her. . . . And all she said about it just now was that everyone had to have a fling once in a while. I think it's damn game to look at it that way . . . You don't think I squealed on you, do you, Mike?" he finished ingenuously.

Michael shook his head in answer; and Pip bent over suddenly to catch the cocker up into his arms. He did not see the curious mute expression on Michael's face, nor the question in his eyes as he looked beyond to Julie, who had gone to the sideboard behind Pip, and was standing with her arm resting close beside the old hound pitcher. Nor could he tell that at the question, "Did you know, Julie?" coming queerly from Michael, the girl behind him moved her head faintly in silent negation. His face was

lowered against the puppy's soft head. He was aware of nothing. "Didn't I *tell* you, Mike?" he offered in happy reassurance, his lips against Tess's floppy ear.

"Where's the hound pitcher off to?" asked Michael, so abruptly that Pip lifted his head in quick surprise.

"To the garden," he answered.

"No more tales out of school, Pippin!" was Michael's sole comment. And turning away, he made for his den.

Pip swung round to look at Julie. His face wore a comical expression. "Now d'ye think he was put out—or don't you? . . . You can't always tell, with Mike."

"No," said Julie, her eyes on the empty doorway—"you can't."

Casting off all care, Pip deposited Tess on the floor and went over to the window. He opened it wide, and without more ado fetched the plate of cookies and passed it forth to the grubby paw that waited. "Milk?" he asked, holding the hound pitcher poised over an empty glass . . .

With extraordinary relief, Julie turned to the thing of the moment; grateful beyond belief for just this,—feeding three care free boys with cookies and milk, and, with Pip's help, keeping the old pitcher, that had been given to her, from coming to an untimely end.

2

Michael was on his way home. He had walked over to Five Acres corner, to the south of the town, to see Bob Gaunt about seed corn and oats. No man in the country had better grain and corn for planting than Bob; and no

man was a greater talker. It had been late when Michael said good-night, on the tail of a contract, and, calling Fanny, had crossed a narrow plank over a brook in flood and made for Black Horse Hill.

A strong wind swept across the fields. To the east, along the horizon, the sky held a smoky line of haze. Though it had been an open winter, with comparatively little snow, the frost had hung on in the ground until well into March; and only ten days ago had plowing begun. Skirting freshly turned ground on the slope behind Gaunt's red farmhouse, Michael sniffed the good smell of the earth. In a fenced pasture beside the cart track that climbed the hill, two colts trotted off at his approach: the splendid springy trot, with heads up and tails streaming, of colts at large. The sight brought sharply back to Michael yesterday's incident of Pip's confession, and the boy's ingenuous praise of Julie for, as he had put it—letting him, Michael, have his fun with Jane's colt . . .

If only it had been like that, how wonderful! Just as Pip had believed: as for one preposterous moment he had: clutching at the sense of intimate understanding implied by such an act. At the spontaneous words of the question that had sprung from his lips, he had seen the painful color flame in Julie's face, as faintly, that Pip might not know, she had shaken her head. She had deliberately let Pip maintain his sturdy belief in him. Why? And then, suddenly, it came to him. She had been trying to keep up appearances. She had not wished to let him down before Pip . . . He felt the hot blood mounting within him. "Good God!" he swore miserably; "is it as bad as that?"—That Julie should be forced to protect him, by implying a

lie! He drove his fist deep into his breeches pocket and strode on grimly up the hill . . . It could not go on! No! Then, in swift reversion: If Julie made no move, how could he? He couldn't. Unseeing, oblivious of the early spring world of hill and woods, of cedar pasture and brown plow, he tramped on . . . by turns, furious with himself, and hopelessly at fault as to the future. What hell it was to love someone and not— Oh, Julie! He came to the top of a hill. Cedar pastures swept down before him to a line of brook. There was a hemlock by a narrow foot-bridge, and beyond, with its orchard climbing to meet the pines on a farther hill, an old weathered house. —How had he got there? He must have traveled blind. He'd have to pull up a bit . . . He'd had some hot words with Toby right down by that hemlock two days ago, over that damn colt of Jane's. Rather, about his wretched cracked ribs. Pip, standing first on one foot and then the other, his face flaming, had heard it all . . . It was a good thing he had to go off to Virginia for a week. He couldn't stand a lot more.

Michael became suddenly aware that he was biting hard on the stem of a perfectly cold pipe. He took it out of his mouth and crammed it into his pocket. Then, with a savage tweak, pulled the brim of his felt hat low over his eyes, and stared down, against the setting sun, at the house below . . .

How could things have got into such an inconceivable jam? And where, in God's name, was it all going to end? He did not know how much longer he could stick things as they were—and hide—what had to be hidden . . . God,

how far away they had got from that day, only two months ago, when he had, all so innocently—and, as he now saw, with so much for which to be blamed—brought Julie home to Windyhill! His thoughts went swiftly back to that day of quiet snow when they had been married. —Married? He had made of the intent of that austere and simple service, a very travesty. As though from the hilltops he had cried aloud his mockery. Blindly, with sublime self-confidence, he had swept Julie into this disastrous thing . . . Standing now on the hilltop, looking down on that old peaceful house from which he had taken her, he knew how deeply he had wronged her. He saw it all—from that winter afternoon when he had brought her home as his wife, through each successive link forged in the inevitable chain of happenings—until this moment.

. . . What would he not give that he might simply, and with honor, obey those words he had so confidently repeated . . . Love, honor and cherish Julie! And his love for her, because he must crush it down and hide it, had turned upon him . . . crept between them to break and hurt what had once been kind and fine . . . making him lash out roughly and stupidly, so that Julie could say, as on that night when they had driven to Uncle David's:—"Oh, Michael, can't we be friends, even?" —Friends! No! he could not be her friend. If only Julie—"I'm tied—tied—tied!" he broke out sharply. "What can I say? What can I do?" He drew in a hard breath and jerked up his head: he was back again just where he had started. Over and over and over he had started there—and come back

to start desperately again . . . like a wretched squirrel in a cage!

Stirred to action by his outbreak, unconsciously he had left the top of the hill and was going down through the pasture. He came at length to the foot-bridge over the brook. He crossed it, without looking to right or left, and turned abruptly for home.

Stalking along the lane that passed the house, his head bent, his eyes upon the ruts that ran before him, he failed to see that the sun, now dropped behind the hill, had left the faint fresh green of the spring world drenched in a mist of translucent gold. He did not see, riding toward him from the river road, a girl on a gray pony.

A dog barked. Michael lifted his head. There before him, swinging along, apparently as care free as a bird, was Julie.

Almost simultaneously, she had seen him. She pulled up old Solomon and, her only sign of greeting an expectant tilt of her head, waited quietly his approach. And to Michael it seemed for one breathless moment, when all else faded from him, as the sunset light caught fire and flamed in her hair and poured over her in a golden mist, that the girl on the gray pony at the foot of a darkling hill was transmuted to a figure of pure mystery and beauty. For that moment, his love was freed and went out in a glad flight. His heart sang. . . . He raised his arm in a spontaneous gesture, and went forward. He felt and saw again with curious poignancy. Like a thirsty man coming upon a spring of clear water, he drank the freshness of the evening in grateful gulps. His eyes fell suddenly on a clump of white violets growing in a hollow by a smooth

rock. There came to him some lines of Masfield:

I thought of the running water where sweet white violets
grow.

I said: "I'll pick them for her, because she loves them so."

He leaned swiftly and picked one tiny flower.

He held the violet out to Julie as he came up beside the pony: "Here you are," he said on a flash of happiness. And Julie, taking the little white flower, gave him a brief, thrilling smile.

"I didn't know they were out yet, Michael," she said almost shyly. And then, with a little gasp, as though drawn up out of herself: "Oh, look! Look at the moon, Mike, over the crab-apple tree!"

He swung about, to see the full moon, faintly silver, hanging over the old crab-apple tree at the end of the lane. And turning back to Julie, felt that an awkwardness had fallen between them.

"I—I've been for a wonderful ride . . ." Julie was speaking to him, with effort, as might a dutiful child, accounting to a grown-up for having slipped away. The simple words plunged Michael fathoms deep. Anger, at himself, flamed hotly within him. What a stupid fool he had been—to blunder into this! . . . That white violet . . . Julie did not want white violets, from him. And now— In swift reaction came the thought of yesterday . . . Julie and Pip there in the dining room—

"Julie—" he said suddenly, and looking up found her eyes fixed upon him. They were clouded by a shadow, as though breathlessly she waited—for what? In curious bewilderment, he plunged ahead: "Yesterday—there in

the dining room— It was decent of you, Julie, not to let me down, before Pip. You shouldn't have bothered to do it." He was getting formal, mixing things up. He knew it. And feeling horribly helpless, blundered on, "You mustn't get pushed into lying, to save my skin, you know, Julie. You can't do that." . . . Oh! what was he saying? He saw the difficult color creep up into Julie's face, and took his eyes away.

"Oh, Michael," her voice, filled with somber wistfulness, sounded in his ears, "what have I done . . . to change you so?"

"Nothing!" At her unexpected words, which every bit of him cried out to answer with the truth, the restraint he put upon himself made the word sound bald and harsh. . . .

And then they were going up the hill: old Solomon and he, walking side by side. He was looking straight before him, seeing nothing, knowing that he had somehow tied a further knot in the rope that bound him hand and foot—dragging him away from Julie.

At the top of the hill, as they plunged into the gloom of the woods, he looked up at the girl riding by his side. He must break this dreadful silence that had fallen upon them, weighing them down:

"I've got to go to Virginia for a week," he said. "Would you want to go, Julie?"

His amazing words seemed to surprise her not at all. She looked at him for a minute before she answered quietly, "I think I'll stay at Windyhill, thank you, Michael." . . . He heard the wind go soughing through the far-off tops of the pines. Solomon reached lazily at his bit. Tess

came suddenly headlong from a footpath, and, with Fanny joining in the chase, made off down the hill toward the barn. A clear, golden light sifted through the dark trees. The air was cool and fresh. Michael walked on beside the gray pony. He did not speak. Neither did Julie. . . .

They emerged at length from the dusky half light of the woods. At their feet, secure in the homely peace of dumb animals at evening, lay the barns and farmyard. On the farther slope, above a curve of golden river, the old square house loomed darkly against a sky of paler gold. There, too, was tranquillity, in the slow rising of smoke from a big chimney. Tea would be waiting . . . the dogs, and Toby . . .

Michael turned then to look at Julie. —And he had once said to her—“Ride or tie.” . . . Her delicious thin face and smooth head in profile, she was looking before her, down to that old house below: remote from him, thinking her own thoughts. . . . His wife! What irony! What a grim lie . . . The swift impulse to take her—to tell her the truth—rushed over him— To *make* her love him! —Could he do it?

. . . “I saw a bluebird this afternoon,” she was saying, as though from miles away, dreaming in a world of her own. . . . God, no! He had only been dreaming, too . . . Very wildly.

“The first, I guess, Julie,” he answered. And, out of his despair, it was as though he were not faintly interested.

3

Toby had been going off with Michael to ride the western bounds, for a mark in question . . . and because he had wanted her so terribly, he had sent an apparently random suggestion across the luncheon table to Julie . . . Was she fed up with farming? They were riding bounds . . . there was a bluebird's nest . . .

To Toby's amazed and acute delight Julie had shot a mischievous glance at him that made him gasp with heady, reckless love of her. . . . "I haven't been farming for ages," she had said, "and I've never ridden bounds or seen a bluebird's nest." Then flashing a look at Michael, who was grimly cutting up a chop: "Do you mind, Michael?" she had asked.

Toby had wondered if she were pulling old Mike's leg; but just then he hadn't really cared . . . Julie was coming . . . Alluring and gay, she would be with them, riding some of the time side by side with him.

At her question Michael had looked up suddenly as though he, too, could not believe his ears . . . Terribly pleased. . . .

They had had a wonderfully happy ride. Toby had, anyway, for an hour. They had found the bounds mark, and he had got Julie to sing that whale of an old hunting song.

And then, briefly, out of a clear sky, Mike had said he must go to Todd's farm about a calf or something. . . . They had better ride on— It was going to rain. . . . And Julie had shut right up and let Mike go off alone.

Toby had felt that it was all way beyond him. But he did know, suddenly, sharply, that he was playing rather recklessly with fire—and it must stop—soon. . . . There couldn't be any harm, though, in riding with Julie in a brotherly fashion along the lanes and woods beyond Windyhill . . . popping over an occasional wall. Just so that it *should* be brotherly! But for weeks he had proved that it could. Hadn't he?

It had begun to rain, gusty splashes at first, the wind strong from the east. Raw . . . the fields gone queerly colorless.

But Julie had laughed, a little reckless spurt of laughter, and lifted her face to the cold spring rain. "Smell it, Tobias!" she had said. "There's nothing better. Prod on old Tom— Let's make for home, cross-country."

"All plow," he had reminded her with a grin.

"Michael's?" she had questioned.

"Mm, yes," he had nodded. And the next minute she had swung Solomon about, hopped over two rails at the side of the road, and was skirting a wide field, half of it dark, freshly turned plow. Old Tom and he had followed. . . . Lord, how she could ride! . . . Long gray spears of rain blotted out the woods to the left, cutting athwart the slope before them. He was beside Julie and they were cantering along a squelching cart track close beside a stonewall. . . . Never in his life had he been so happy as at that moment— A thrilling, intoxicating happiness—reckless of anything that might come beyond . . . Just he and Julie together . . . the fresh cold rain whipping their faces . . . He had wanted suddenly with terrible urgency to sweep her off that old gray pony, to catch her to him

and press her cool rain-washed face to his. . . . God! what had he not thought! —His brother's wife— And then, miraculously, as though brought there by his thoughts of him, a dark, rain-blurred figure had loomed up at the foot-bridge over the brook: Michael, on The Djinn, the rain sluicing off his old felt hat, his big shoulders hunched, the most curious beaten look upon his face. . . .

With a little gasp, Julie had pulled up Solomon. And then with no particular words about it—certainly no fuss—Michael had taken from his saddle a thin white rubber slicker and was leaning to help Julie into it. "It got us, all right," he had heard Mike say—as though it were no matter to him what got them; and he had seen Julie give Mike the strangest look . . . baffled, shot with a flick of pain— Why? "I saw you from the farm," Michael was explaining, "and remembered the slicker." Toby had found himself asking futilely about the calf. —"Oh—the calf?—I forgot it," Michael had said, pulling aside his pony that Julie might cross the bridge.

Toby had ridden behind them all the way home.

He was sitting now, sunk deep in the leather armchair by the fire in the library. Julie was at the tea table. She, as he, had changed after that drenching ride over the fields—Michael's plow . . . She wore something soft and black that clung in delicious folds, and about her throat a string of lovely pearls. Her hair, in the light from the lamp on the table beyond, shone like a bit of burnished copper. —But for some stupid reason Michael had only peeled off, in his den or somewhere, the soaking tweed coat in which he had got off The Djinn, to put on a sort of jerkin thing

of thin leather. He sat between them, crouched over on the bench before the fire, with the dogs lying about at his feet, and Toby could see that the knees of his breeches were dark with rain. Julie was making a third cup of tea for him: Toby watched her as, head bent, looking down at the tea kettle, she tipped it to pour the hot water over the tea ball she twirled beneath it in Michael's cup. He kept his eyes upon her as she lifted hers. How long they were! What a lovely face she had! It was thinner, he thought, and all the more alluring . . . She was looking at Michael as she held out his cup, just a little doubtful, wondering and almost wistful. She was going to ask something of Michael, he thought. If he could resist her, whatever it was, he must be made of ice.

"I wore your slicker, Michael," she began, her voice tentative and very gentle. "Hot tea is fine, of course, but it takes a bit of time to get to one's knees— Yours are soaking wet, Mike."

Michael was looking at her queerly, an odd light flickering in his eyes. Something seemed to happen in his face.

"Yes, they are," he said. "Do you mind?"

At the words spoken shortly, and under Michael's curious, still gaze, Toby saw the faint color rise in Julie's face; but her eyes held steady upon the man before her.

"Not if you—*like* them that way," she said slowly. Was she smiling? Toby wasn't sure.

Michael gave an odd laugh. "I'll give the tea a chance, I guess," he said, and calmly taking up the cup he had set beside him on the bench, twisted round to face the fire. Julie only leaned over and stroked a soft, dog nose poked on to her knee.

There fell then upon the room a hush, which for a space it seemed no one wished to break. Certainly Toby did not. He had had his tea, two cups of it, as only Julie could make it: sweet enough, and scalding hot. She never forgot that extra lump— He lay back, smoking a cigarette, letting his thoughts bring before him again the more vivid bits of that afternoon's ride with Julie . . . He saw her face up-tilted to the rain, as she cried happily, "Smell it, Tobias!"; her look of quiet mischief, with the words, "Prod on, Old Tom" . . . He remembered the lithe twist of her body as she swung old Solomon about and lifted him over the rails at the lane's side, and knew again the reckless exhilaration of cantering along a squelching cart track with the cold splash of rain in his face . . . Unconsciously his dreaming eyes focussed for a moment on the actual Julie . . . there before him, in a golden blur of light from the lamp. She had taken the cocker into her lap, a gloss of blackness against the more somber black of her dress. The puppy's head in the crook of her arm, one soft ear laid darkly upon it, she was looking down, as with her free hand she caressed the little dog's smooth back . . . as a woman held something to love it gently—a baby . . . a dog, and—

. . . "Smoke?" He'd forgotten all about old Mike. He watched Julie look slowly up, and saw her smile, and shake her head. . . . Once more the silence crept about them and pushed him back upon his own thoughts . . . What was Julie thinking, he wondered. Mike never did forget those little things for her . . . How could it come out for those two? —Impossible, absurd, incredible affair! They were as strangely offhand as—he couldn't think what. And

yet, Mike could remember a slicker—and forget a calf . . . Julie could gallop over his plow—and then look at Mike the way she had there at the bridge over the brook. God!—he gave it up. . . . If Julie had married *him* she wouldn't have spent her days pottering around alone a lot of the time! Or her nights alone—in Naomi's old room! . . . But she hadn't married him. It was not for him to say where or how she should spend her days—or nights . . . He knew two things. They drove at him now sharply. —When Mike got back, *he* must go. He could not stand it. But, before he went, he meant to talk to Mike—about the two of them. It just couldn't lead to any happiness for them this way. He would get his answer, he knew. Perhaps as hot as pepper; perhaps crisp, restrained and cryptic. You didn't always know, with Mike; but he couldn't go away and leave things like this, without taking a shot first.

“Are you asleep, Toby?” Julie's amused question made him jump.

“God, no!” he answered vehemently and abruptly.

She was smiling at him. “Do you want to do a brotherly favor?”

He was conscious of Mike's big figure swinging to look at Julie. “You bet!” he answered, wondering.

“Do you remember a thing you played the night you came back?” (Why hadn't she said her wedding night?) Michael had got to his feet, beyond the bench, and was standing on the hearth, looking down into the fire . . . Toby was thinking hard; but could only remember the bridal feast without the groom . . .

“No—Julie, frankly, I don't.” He smiled across at her.

"I remember drinking a toast to you that night," he found himself answering.

"It was a gypsy thing, Toby," came the quiet words from Michael, as he turned slowly to look at Julie.

"Oh—yes!" Toby caught him up with swift recollection. "I remember now."

"Was it a good toast—Toby's, Julie?" asked Michael, his gray eyes soberly upon her.

"The best," clipped in Toby lightly as he got to his feet: "Happy days!" and he looked squarely into his brother's face.

"Go and play, will you, Toby?" Julie's voice was not too steady.

Toby went. And having finished the wild gypsy thing Julie had asked for, looked up to find her there, alone. Michael had gone.

Chapter Thirteen

I

WITH the air of making the best of a distinctly bad bargain, sitting sidewise, her tongue lolling out, Fanny panted gently and looked off over the corner of the garden to the beech tree by the potting shed. A squirrel had just run up the trunk. Was it worth looking into? Evidently not. She turned her head, bored to death, and looked with bland condescension at the girl kneeling beside her at work in the bed under the wall.

Out of the tail of her eye Julie had seen it all. She gave a rueful laugh.

"Don't take it too hard, Fanny," she said, without turning her head. "It doesn't pay. . . . You'll have him back, your Michael, some time to-morrow." The spaniel brushed her long tail to and fro, her ears and eyes expectant. Julie went on clearing about a clump of iris, the last bit of work to be done. Having finished, in silence,

she knelt a moment longer looking along the wide bed under the mellow brick wall . . . How satisfying it was, this first spring work in a garden! Earthy and fresh and obliterating to troubling thoughts. But afterwards— One came to. And that part of it was rather like the pain of hot ache in numbed fingers, as a child . . . Twisting about, she slumped down, and pulling up her knees, clasping them with her earthy gloves, looked off across the garden. . . . Old Fred came out of the potting shed with a hoe and made his leisurely, bandy-legged way along the path under the beech tree by the wall to the spot in the vegetable garden where he was putting in the first planting of peas. The afternoon sunlight slanted down warmly in the shelter of the wall. In the big hemlock by the house the wind kept up a soothing whisper that sounded like waves heard from far away breaking on a beach. Fanny got up at length and padded off to investigate the planting of peas . . .

How peaceful it was in that old walled garden! Just the murmur of the wind up there in the hemlock . . . the little pat and occasional click against a stone of Fred's hoe as he covered up the row of peas . . . Once a robin called, and was answered; and a jaunty gray catbird, lighting in the path quite close to the quiet girl, flirted and tilted his tail, eyed Julie with a comically cocked head, took fright and flew away. . . . His flight carried Julie's eyes to a bough of the silver beech. Beneath the big tree shone the fresh yellow of the first jonquils. Tess, nosing forth from between two rows of raspberry bushes, trotted solemnly up, and plopping down close to Julie rolled over ingratiatingly with her paws

in the air. Smiling, Julie reached out and gently ruffled the puppy's soft coat. Then once more clasping her knees, her eyes wandered out over the garden. . . . Oh, she could be so happy here! But not like this . . . What had she done to turn the Michael she had known into a silent, formal man of ice—at odds with Toby and all the world, his sense of humor gone? It must have been her doing . . . What else? . . . It could not go on like this,—for Michael's sake, and for hers. She had done her best, in a mad sort of bargain. She could have stood it, perhaps, if— Yes, if Michael had been happy. But he was not happy. —He could ask her if she loved Pat, (Poor old Pat! She could feel for him.) and remind her of that bargain of theirs . . . Did *he* want to get out, too? Was it up to her, as he had almost suggested, to free him? Oh! she terribly needed someone to talk to— But there was no one, now. . . . Suddenly she thought of Sherry. Had he understood? that day that now seemed so long ago—when he had brought her that letter? Did he, in that extraordinarily perceiving way of his, guess how things were? Could she talk to *him*? . . . With a gasp of dismay she now remembered that Pip's puppy, the one he had given her, was sick— She had promised to go there this afternoon. How *could* she have forgotten such a thing?

With real contrition, she got swiftly to her feet. Taking off her gardening gloves and rolling them into a ball, she crammed them into a capacious leather pocket. And two minutes later, having shut the door in the wall behind her, was making her way swiftly down the hill to the house by the river.

A bicycle leaned drunkenly against the apple tree at the corner of the house. It was Pip's. As Julie opened the front door he came into the hall from the room beyond. His dark hair ruffled, clad in an old T-shirt and more ancient flannels, he stood there eating a slice of bread and butter. He took a regular mad-hatter bite as she watched him, his strong white teeth chomping on a crust.

"I thought you'd forgotten, Julie," he said simply. "Do you want tea? Ma had to go off to some stupid old fluff of a—oh, a grandmother's meeting or something; an' I've got to beat it back in a minute. . . . Decent of old 'Kit' to let me off."

"How's the puppy, Pip?" asked Julie, disregarding, as, now that it was made, did Pip, the offer of tea.

"Pretty low, poor little beggar. Vet's just left. Couldn't seem to make out the trouble. . . . Come and see her, Julie." A frown of unhappiness puckered his forehead. "I'm kind of afraid—" he said slowly, as he pushed open a door and went before her down a flagged passage—"that . . . We'll see, though."

In the low room that served as a laundry a wood fire crackled and hissed in the small stove. Close to it, on a faded red blanket, lay the sick puppy.

Sending a quick glance at the puppy, Pip went straight to the stove and took off something brewing there in a saucepan . . . "Milk—" he said. Julie was already on her knees beside the blanket. She did not need to touch the

small prone body to know that little Pippin was dead. But stretching out her hand she laid it tenderly on the soft brown head. Then she spoke, quietly, without turning:

"Pip, old man—" she said, "we shan't need any more milk . . ."

"My God!" The words broke quickly from the boy. And with the saucepan in his hand he was kneeling there beside her. He put it on the floor, and bending over laid a gentle hand on the puppy. Julie heard him sigh sharply. "What was it, d'you suppose?" he asked under his breath, half to himself . . . "Too many French verbs," he suggested suddenly, trying to smile. He swallowed hard and got to his feet. Picking up the saucepan, he spoke with his back turned to the girl kneeling there.

"She would 'a been a good dog, Julie . . . I wanted awfully for you to have her." And after a minute: "Can't help it, now" . . . He put the milk down on the ironing-table and came back to them. Julie had got up.

"I'm terribly sorry, Pip," she said rather unsteadily.

The boy leaned swiftly, and gathering up the dead puppy, blanket and all, into his arms, turned and went out into the passage.

"I'll get Sandy to—tuck her up for the night," he said. And, being Pip, "Thanks a lot for coming, Julie."

She followed him out into the hall. Before she could help him he had somehow got the door open. Then he swung round and sent her a shining sort of smile. "Well—" he said, "you have Mike, anyway—even if you haven't got your wedding present." And turning away, he walked slowly off with his pitiful burden—to find old Sandy.

3

It had needed only such an incident as this to break down in Julie the restraint of many days. She stood for a moment watching the boy's shoulders hunched protectively, an end of red blanket trailing out behind as he went . . . all blurred for the hot tears that burned her eyes. Then, with the one compelling thought—to get away, she turned quickly and walked off along the lane by the river.

She had been standing—she did not know how long—leaning her shoulder against the end of the boathouse. The lap of the water broke now in upon her thoughts. From somewhere came the persistent piping of a frog. She lifted her head and looked out over the river. At her feet, in the lee of the old boathouse, the water was as still as a pool in the woods, and as deeply brown. Beyond that, where the wind faintly ruffled the surface, the reflection of the sinking sun lay in a glittering pathway to the west. A log floated idly past, caught on some unseen snag, twisted slowly and slipped off again. A kingfisher chattered from a clump of alders. Julie gave a long, tremulous sigh and lifted her eyes from their dazed dreaming over the shimmering water. “Oh, God!” she said miserably. And hearing a rustling sound followed by a creak, she swung slowly to see a figure perched on the handrail of the jetty. His broad back presented to her, crouched over with his elbows resting on his knees, Toby swung a pair of long legs and gazed out across the river. . . . How

long had he been there? Had he seen her? She must find out.

"Toby—" she barely raised her voice.

Without turning, only the swinging of his legs stilled, he began to whistle softly,—was it deliberate?—that catchy thing of Pip's: "Can't we talk it over . . . ?" In spite of herself Julie's lips twitched in a smile.

"Are you a fixture on the rail there, Toby?" she asked.

He nodded his head then, and swinging his legs over on to her side of the rail was sitting facing her.

"Kind of," he said with a slow grin. He shaded his eyes from the sidelong slant of the sun and looked quizzically at her. "Are you?—against the wall? . . ." She laughed softly. How nice he was, like that! Like long ago . . .

"Kind of," she mimicked.

"I was beginning to think so," he told her ruefully—"My God, I'm a patient fellar when I get roused!" Then, quite suddenly, the whimsical look faded from his eyes. He slid off the rail, and coming up to Julie put his hands on her shouldres and stood looking down into her face. "Julie—" he said with queer soberness, "you've always been honest as the day— You've been crying— I—" He took his hands quickly from her shoulders and Julie caught the old dangerous sparkle in his eyes that for days she had forgotten— "What is it, Jude? —Not Mike . . . or anything?" he finished with awkward harshness, trying for control.

With swift intuition Julie thrust aside all that might lead to an outbreak. She must keep things in hand—for Toby's sake—and Michael's.

Entirely disregarding the words of his question, she looked gravely up at Toby. "I've just left Pip carrying off a little puppy to tuck up for the night—the long night, Toby. He was so darling, and so heart-breakingly plucky . . . it did something to me, and I came down here . . . I did cry, Toby. . . . Have you been here very long? Have I?"

He was looking at her as though against his will. She saw the muscles working in his cheek. "Don't you believe me, Toby?" she asked gently.

But he only went on looking at her as if he had not heard a word of what she had said. "Yes—" he said after what seemed a long time—"I do."

The broken bits of a laugh were gathering together in his face. "I came here an hour ago to tell you—supper would be ready early . . . Church, or something, Hannah murmured to me apologetically."

"Toby!" Julie's voice broke and quivered into laughter. The danger was over, for the moment.

4

She wore, that night, the soft black dress of her first evening at Windyhill. Toby, as he had followed her from the dining room, had watched with delight how some subtlety of cape or winglike sleeve billowed and floated after her.

She sat now across the width of the hearth from him, in the chair that had been his mother's. The lamp on the table at her elbow spilled about her a pool of golden light,

touching the dim, lovely green of the chair, her arms and smooth, shining head, to a living warmth.

At first, as they had sat there before the fire, drinking their coffee and smoking cigarettes, she had shown Toby flashes of light, contagious gaiety, ending at last with a smile, as she had reached for her book, saying that she must get on with it. And this, for awhile, with an absorption that Toby envied, she had appeared to do.

At length, as for the hundredth time he let his eyes stray from the unread pages of his own book to the girl before him, he found that she was no longer reading. Her book laid in her lap, her slim body turned against the chair-back to face the fire, her eyes were dreaming off . . . so shut away that he might not have been there at all. . . . Thank God, Mike was coming back to-morrow! was his swift thought. It was too much to ask of any man—this! He was no saint,—no stronger than any other man who loved a woman—as he loved Julie.

He dragged his eyes away from her and looked down at his open book. The words wavered across the page. —He could not read. Every bit of him was so terrifyingly aware of her. His throat ached. His heart beat thickly. His lips were dry . . . She was getting up. He did not stir or lift his eyes . . . She would be going, now, please God! He could go out . . . walk his mind and body clear and sane under the cold stars. . . . And then he knew that she had gone to the piano.

“Do you mind if I play a little, Toby?” The words came as a shock to him. He felt as if his body were being dragged back from those cool, starry hills; and he was suddenly afraid.

"I should say not." He had somehow forced out the words to sound natural. It surprised him *how* natural. With no further word on her part, simply, and without fuss, she had crossed the room and seated herself at the piano.

Turning off the light beside him, with his face in shadow, Toby watched her.

She sat for a moment perfectly still. Then, with lifted head, her eyes, forgetful of him and all else, focussed on some thought of her own, she began to play. . . .

Toby's book fell with a thud on to the floor, and lay there. A dog whimpered, dreaming . . .

. . . "I should say not." Toby's words in answer to her question still sounded in Julie's ears as she sat down at the piano. Poor Toby! She had dragged him back so suddenly from those sheep of his . . . that big book in which his nose had been buried . . .

She had begun to play, a wild, rebellious thing written by an Austrian—she had forgotten the man's name. But the spirit of revolt speaking in the lawless lilt and soar of its cadences at that moment met with her own mood . . . If only Martha Holland were there—to wring from her old violin the headlong, reckless sweep of its obligato! . . . Toby? the last faintest thought of the man beyond her, listening in the shadow, was drowned in the music—forgotten. There was no one now but Michael . . . only her love for him, drawing the heart from her body in those thrilling notes, as she played on, with head uplifted and wide eyes fastened on—what?

Suddenly there came a sharply spoken word: her name.

It crashed in upon her, breaking apart the walls the music had builded about her. Leaving the music, itself, a broken thing. Toby—Toby whom she had forgotten—had risen up tall and somber from out the shadows. He was coming across the room to her; and because of the look upon his face she knew a curious fear.

"Stop, Julie!" he burst out hoarsely. He stood glowering down upon her,—“My God! Are you deliberately trying to drag the very heart from me?” His voice was strange and tense. His eyes blazed dangerously.

Her hands, stayed in the middle of a phrase, rested on the keys. In painful surprise she looked at him—

“Toby!” she whispered. “What do you mean?”

“This!” he said, and before she could stop him he had pulled her roughly to her feet—crushing her to him, his mouth hurting hers in hot, hard kisses.

Powerless against his strength, horrified beyond any speech, she suffered it because she must. Then, as he came slowly to his senses and relaxed his grasp, she pushed him from her.

“Toby—” her voice shook, she was trembling; but she looked at him, all her courage shining in her eyes. “You are too brave a man for this. —I am Michael’s wife, Toby.”

And Toby, towering over her, superb in his passion—turned now half to anger—superb, and yet somehow pitiful—was trembling even as she.

“You are *not* Michael’s wife,” he said brutally. “Why, in God’s name, do you put up with this travesty!”

At that, quickly, blindly, she put out her hand to lay it on his arm. “I love him, Toby,” she said. “That is my reason.” . . .

"My God!" pity, incredulous horror, darkened his eyes.

"Yes—" she was looking past him now, and could not help the tears that fell, "and he—is—less than a friend, Toby."

"Christ!" The word broke in half and died upon his lips. Swinging sharply away, he left her, with the truth she had at last spoken thrown down and shattered to fragments at her feet.

There came to her, in that moment—the loneliest of her life—swift, illuminating in its conviction, a thought that swept all other thoughts, all doubts, aside. Freed, she stood face to face with something she at last understood: action!

She must hold Toby there at Windyhill until Michael got back. That she could only do by going away before Toby did. Now—this very minute. . . . She loved Michael. She would perform for him the only act in her power to restore for the two brothers the peace and happiness they had known before she had allowed Michael his generous gesture that had so disastrously mixed up their lives—his, and Toby's, and hers. She, too, could be generous. She would go back this very night to the old house that had been her father's. She would write a simple, direct letter to Michael—and go. . . .

Chapter Fourteen

I

TOBY saw her go. Standing at the open window of his room next Michael's, right over the heavy front door, he heard it shut and then he saw her, a dark, slight shape in the light of the waning moon. Her head up, purposeful and free—she was walking away from Windyhill. And he, Michael's brother, was responsible. He must—for what should come after—find out where Julie went. Taking with him his electric torch, he made his way quickly along the hall and down the stairs. In the hall below, one of the dogs thumped a tail, drowsily, on the end of the settle. Toby crossed to the door and went out.

The moon, shrunk to three-quarters, hung above the trees on the hill. Julie was going on up the lane to the gate. She was carrying some sort of a bag. He saw suddenly that a dog trotted at her heels. Tess. So, the

comforting thought came to him, she was not going far.—To her own house, of course! He would risk it and take the short cut over the hill where the beeches grew. She must not know that he followed her.

At the gate he stopped. He had lost sight of Julie. The moon shone down on an empty road. Then from the shadow of the trees beyond the farm barns there came the faint rasp of a shoe sole striking on stone. The old culvert. He waited a moment longer, that Julie might get well on her way up the hill; then, crossing the road, he followed her, walking on the grass at the lane's edge, into the deeper shadow of the pines.

Coming at length to the footpath he would take, he stopped to listen. A cool wind, moist and filled with the fragrance of pine and hemlock, blew over his face. It soughed faintly in the big trees overhead. He heard no other sound. Flashing on his electric torch, he plunged into the narrow path and took the rise at a sharp jog that soon brought him to the open glade at the top. Switching off his torch, he saw the beech trees for a second, their smooth boles and intricate fine branches a ghostly silver in the moonlight. Then he was running past them across the open and had plunged once more into the woods. With the light to help him he made his way swiftly down a twist of path through the pines till he came to the edge of the moonlit orchard and heard the sound of frogs in the pool at the turn of the brook. . . . If Julie came this way she would have to pass the rock at the curve of the lane. His eyes upon the rock, he waited. A small, dark object moved across the corner of the orchard. It was Tess. And then Julie was walking steadily along the

lane past the rock, and the next moment had disappeared behind the hemlock at the corner of the house.

His heart was pounding so, as he stood with his eyes fastened upon the dim shape of a window above the jog where the shed joined the house, that he could actually hear it thumping in his chest. Then the thing he waited for happened. There had come the faint flicker of a light. It steadied, and the space of window was a checkered square of gold in the somber bulk of the house. At that moment a big chimney hid the moon. . . . Toby sank on to his heels at the foot of an apple tree. He would wait till Julie's light went out. Then he would creep quietly into a shed . . . He could not leave her in that old sleeping house . . . with no one near, all the night through. . . .

2

It was late evening when Michael came walking down from the barn, where he had been dropped. The moon had not yet risen, but the sky was clear and strewn with stars. A fresh wind came to greet him, blowing over the hill from the river. He sniffed it gratefully. Lord, how good it was to get back to Windyhill. He had it all made square with himself now. He was going to talk to Julie, simply and truthfully. He would hold her no longer to this thing that was an insult to her womanhood, and unbearable to him. He had forgotten all about Toby. His mind and heart were filled with Julie . . . making things right again for her. . . . He came to the house, opened the door and went in.

Toby, with a pipe gripped in his teeth, turned slowly from the fire to look at him. "Hello, Mike," he said queerly. "Didn't hear you come . . ."

"Where's Julie?" Michael asked bluntly, with a strange stir of premonition at his heart. Paying for once no heed to Fanny's joyous greeting, he brushed her aside and walked up to Toby. "Is anything wrong?" he asked . . . "Nothing's happened—to Julie . . . ?" A suffocating sensation caught the words in his throat.

Toby was looking at him oddly . . . biting hard on that infernal pipe of his. "Damn it! Can't you speak, Toby?" Michael rapped out sharply, for the fear that held him.

Still looking at him, Toby took his pipe from between his teeth. "Yes, Mike, I can," he said in a quiet voice. "Julie's not sick— Nothing of that sort has happened." Michael saw him turn, then, slowly, and reach behind a picture on the mantelpiece. He brought down an envelope and held it out. "She has gone away, Mike," he said evenly, and the words sounded to Michael casual and cruel.

He held on to Toby's eyes for a moment with his own, his fingers crushing the letter curled in his fist. Then, without caring for Toby, for anything but to know what Julie had to tell him, he swung away and walked over to the lamp on the table under the window. Standing there, he tore the letter open.

It seemed to Toby, waiting by the fire, as if hours passed before there came the rustle of crushed paper and he heard Michael stir. Still without moving, he stared on at a spot of glowing embers—waiting for Michael to

speaking . . . knowing, even, that he had come to stand by the end of the settle.

"Toby!" He had never before heard Mike's voice like that—filled with a curious appeal. It broke in on his own hot feelings of revolt, and brought Michael with it. Slowly he turned to face his brother. "Well—" he began, like a defiant boy. But all defiance dropped away at the look upon Michael's face.

. . . "She thinks she's hurting things for us—" The gray eyes held a haunting question. —"Why should she think that, Toby?"

"That's not it! —Not all of it!" The words broke from Toby against his will: "She just can't stand it, Mike—"

"Stand what, Toby?" Michael was looking at him with dark searching eyes.

"Why, in God's name, did you marry her, Mike?"

"You may well ask, Toby," Michael was holding on hard to whatever emotions surged within him.

"That's why she can't stand it . . ." Toby knew that his voice shook. His heart beat thickly, driving him on. "My God! Are you made of ice?"

Michael was looking at him somberly, his face strained and taut. "I wish I were," he said at last.

"You *love*—Julie?" Incredulously Toby shot out the words. "And you *don't—know—?*"

He saw Michael's fingers whiten, so hard they gripped the back of the settle. "Know what?" The words were only a husky whisper.

And then for a strange, silent moment, as the world seemed to draw very far off and leave them quite alone, Toby looked at his brother. At last words came to him:

"You're the luckiest man, and the greatest fool, Michael, that God ever let live under one skin . . . Julie loves you—She has always loved you." . . . He took an impulsive step, and stretching out his hand gripped his brother's shoulder. He would pay his debt to the full. "She is in her own house, beyond the hill, Michael," he said, and felt how all life had gone out of him.

"Toby—!" His hand was grasped swiftly in Michael's powerful fingers, and he never afterwards forgot the look on Michael's face, nor his voice, as he said, "No man could do a greater thing for me than you have done to-night." Then, abruptly loosing his grasp on Toby's fist, Michael turned from him, and without a word crossed the hall and went out. . . . Toby, standing just where he had left him, staring over the back of the settle, heard the door shut and knew that a forgotten Fanny had come to crouch huddled on the rug at his feet. . . . There were just two things more to do— To write a letter; and, before morning came, to have gone from Windyhill. —Well—that letter! He would write it now.

He left the dog and the fire, and walking along the hall passed the door of the old library . . . Before the dining room he stopped. Light from the hall fell in a slanting patch across the face of that other Tobias Cochrane . . . smiling down now as he had ever since Toby could remember, from the wall behind his mother's chair. He might not see the old fellar for a good bit of time . . . Well—no use making a fuss about it! He turned quickly away and walked on to Michael's den.

Sitting at that wide familiar desk that had been his father's, he stared for a moment at a little filly done in

bronze . . . Pat's, he knew . . . terribly good . . . Great fellar, Pat— What had taken him off in such a rush? . . . he wished he'd seen Julie's head finished. . . . "God—" he said suddenly, huskily. And then: "Perhaps I've squared things with old Mike," he whispered.

Straightway pulling paper toward him and taking up a pen, he began to write. He must keep it so that Mike should guess nothing . . . His pen moved rapidly over the paper, forming with bold strokes the words that came to him:

It's the 'Old Spring Fret', Mike. The Red Gods have begun to call—hard,—do you remember?—and I'm off to see the first lambs frisk. For once in a way, perhaps, the rolling stone has done a bit of good. It's something to have rolled into and waked up the old Cock.

Thanks for a lot, Mike—a roof between me and the weather, a fire to warm my shins, a pillow—and I'll be seeing you—

Tobias.

He folded the sheet of paper, and putting it in an envelope, which he directed to Michael Cochrane, Esquire, stood it up against Pat's little bronze filly. Old Cock would see it there sometime; and until then, what matter? Now—he must get his things together, and go . . . Resting his chin on his fist, he leaned there for a moment longer, staring into the gloom beyond the pool of light on the desk. Until a clock, striking the hour, roused him, and he sighed sharply. His eyes fell upon the letter propped before him: with an abrupt motion he got to his feet and switched off the light. . . .

3

The spring night was cool and very still. When Michael came out of the woods at the top of the hill the moon was beginning to show over the shoulder of that farther hill, and beyond the orchard and old sleeping house the frogs were piping. He could hear the sound of the brook tumbling over the rock into the pool below the bridge. . . . How could it be true . . . what Toby had said . . . ? What, if it were, must not Julie have suffered at his hands. . . . He was going down the hill now. He thought suddenly of the white violet he had picked and given to her. Sitting there on the old gray pony, her smooth hair flaming in a mist of golden light from the setting sun, she had taken the tiny flower from him and she had smiled at him. How game of her! What had she thought then? . . . Was he so blind—as that?”

He walked more slowly now, and silently, along the grass at the lane's edge. It must be ten o'clock. *Would* Julie be there? He could see no light. But the moon, shining now on the face of the old house, showed a dim open space which was Julie's window . . . Then as he moved forward the darkness of the hemlock came between. His heart was pounding against his ribs, as a man's heart pounds after a hard race. The blood beat and throbbed in his ears . . .

He came to the tall lilac at the end of the path . . . Passed it, and felt a flagstone beneath his foot. —And then he saw her— Wrapped in a dark cloak, her lifted face remote in the moonlight, she sat on the doorstone

and leaned her shoulder against the house. From the shadow of the doorway a dog barked sharply. Julie turned, and her eyes were upon him. She spoke his name, hushed, as though from a great distance. . . .

Then all in a minute he was standing before her. She had not moved . . . His heart beat so that it seemed to shake his body. "Julie—" he said— And suddenly, because of something in her face, a truth no longer hidden, by her eyes, or her quivering mouth, a great strength came to him: he cried out in a strange, incredulous voice: "My God, it's true!" And brokenly, his eyes on hers, "Forgive me, Julie, if you can . . ."

He leaned swiftly, before she could move or speak, and caught her up into his arms. Stepping across the stone, he went in at the open door . . . "What is it, Michael?" she whispered once, her cheek against the roughness of his coat. He did not answer . . . only went on climbing the shallow stairs, crossed the hall above, and so came to the room that was hers. Holding her close, he went in, wading knee-deep through a flood of moonlight to a dim and shadowy chair. There he gently put her down. . . .

"Michael—" she whispered again— "What is it, Michael?"

For a moment he stood looking down upon her face: mute, for the great glory of his love for her, that surged within him. Then slipping to his knees, he took her blindly into his arms, and buried his face against her breast . . . "Can I stay with you here . . . to-night . . . and tell you, Julie . . . ?"

She gave a little broken sound in her throat, and he

felt her slender body tremble and come to him . . . With a long, shivering sigh, she gathered him close. . . .

A pale light stole over the hill . . . The stars flickered out and left a ghostly moon high-floating in the west . . . A bird stirred and sang . . .

In deep tranquillity the old house slept beneath its budding orchard . . .

Along the lane a man came walking. Before the house he stopped. He lifted his arm in a mute and gallant gesture. Then he turned, and passing under the hemlock crossed the narrow bridge above the brook, climbed the hill, stood for a moment dark against the coming dawn in the sky—and was gone. . . .

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